How to play the 5-string Banjo

by

Pete Seeger

NOTE: This is the third reprinting of the second edition of this manual. At the rate things are going, it will probably have to be reprinted again in 1962. At that time the author would much like to correct numerous typographical errors and perhaps make other small additions. If any reader would care to write a letter pointing out needed changes, such suggestions would be very welcome. It would also help other poor luckless beginners in future years.

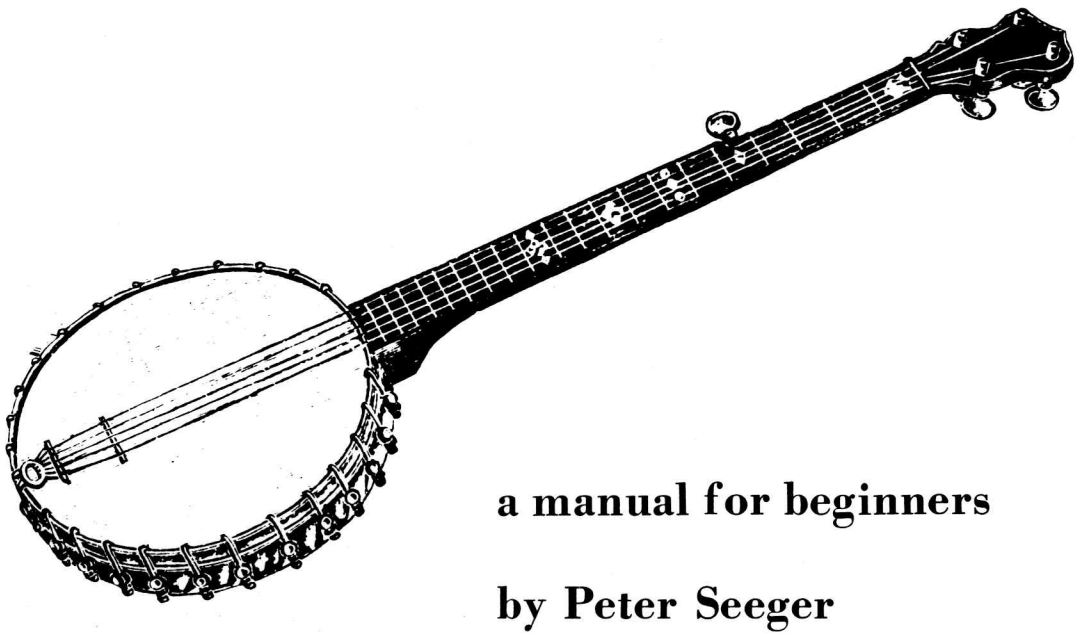
Thanks, Pete Seeger

Beacon, N.Y.
February, 1960

2nd Edition

HOW TO PLAY THE

5-STRING BANJO



a manual for beginners

by Peter Seeger

Printed by the author Beacon, N.Y. 1954

1st Edition 1st Printing 1948
2nd Printing 1951

2nd Edition 1st Printing 1954

This is the second edition of this manual. It has been added to and revised slightly, and thereby, it is hoped, improved. The first edition was mimeographed, its stencils having been typed in a variety of hotel rooms while the author was accompanying Henry Wallace in the presidential campaign of 1948. The first printing of 100 copies sold out in three years. The second printing, also mimeographed, sold its 500 copies in another three years. A casual statistician might thus deduce (assuming the same rate of increase continues,) that 390,000 copies will be sold within the next twelve years. As G.B. Shaw said, however, 'there are lies, damned lies, and statistics'. The author prudently limits this printing to 3000.

To go with this manual, a Long Playing record has been prepared in which one can hear all important examples in this book played two ways: very slowly and clearly, and up to tempo. This should be of special value to those who cannot read read music, or have no banjo playing friends or teachers to help them over the hurdles. The record costs $4.75 and can be ordered from Ethnic Folkways Recordings, 117 West 46th St., N.Y., N.Y.

Copies of this manual may be ordered from the author, or from the Village String Shop, 184 Bleecker Street, New York, N.Y. Price $1.75 postpaid.

The first edition said "Copyright 1948". This, we fear, was a falsehood. The necessary four bucks were never shelled out. Furthermore, upon reflection, and with the good example of J. Frank Dobie of Texas, it is not copyright in 1954. Permission is hereby given to reprint, whenever needed.

Special acknowledgement and thanks go to Fleming Brown, artist and banjo picker of Chicago, and to Edward Epstein, likewise, of New York City, for their fine pen and ink drawings.

Thanks also to Marty Cohen, the banjo engineer, for assistance in plans for lengthening banjo necks. Also to Woody Wachtel, Dave Sear, Joe Jaffe, and Jerry Silverman. for advice and suggestions. To Lillian Goodman for her typing. To Margot Mayo and to Harry West for use of their photographs of Rufus Crisp, Samantha Bumgarner, and Uncle Dave Macon. To Tony Schwartz for cover and title page.

Most of all to Toshi-Aline Seeger for paste-up and layout, and general patience, perseverance, and perspicacity.

Dedicated with thanks to the many men and women, in many walks of life, who helped me learn the banjo, and to those whose records I listened to, such as Uncle Dave Macon, Rufus Crisp, Samantha Bumgarner , Bascom Lunsford, Lilly Mae Ledford, and Earl Scruggs.

Dedicated also to the men and women who, still earlier, taught them.

But most of all to the folks who will learn from us, carrying an age-old tradition on. Around and around this old world, ring, ring the banjo.

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I

History

Played by hundreds of thousands of Americans 75 or 100 years ago, by 1940 this instrument had nearly died out.

Negro slaves brought the first banjoes over here; before that the origin is disputed. Possibly the Arabs brought it to the African west coast; possibly the Arabs themselves picked it up from civilizations further east. At any rate, 125 years ago the banjo consisted basically of three strings, with maybe just a possum hide stretched across a gourd, for a drum.

Then began a period of experimentation. Frets were added, various numbers of strings tried out, and one Joe Sweeney of Virginia was credited with inventing in 1831 a little fifth string running from a little peg halfway up the neck.**

It was this version that became fantastically popular and was picked up by the country as a whole. It travelled west in the covered wagons, and one could be found hanging on the wall of any farmhouse or mining shack. Even trained singers, such as Patti, would play one for amusement. Later, concert virtuosos, with phenomenal techniques, tried to take it out of the domain of the minstrel shows ..... I've even heard of the William Tell overture being attempted on a banjo.

With the advent of ragtime and jazz, around the turn of the Century, the long necked 5-stringer was gradually abandoned in favor of the shorter Tenor Banjo. This was tuned differently, and with heavier strings, to better compete with the loud brass instruments. The Tenor Banjo had its hey-day in the 1920's, and then in turn was left behind by modern dance bands.

Today, the 5-string banjo is almost forgotten; instrument companies produce very few; a hock shop is the most likely place to find a good one. Still, it is played by back-country people, especially in the South, to accompany ballads and play for square dances. And precisely because it is so excellently suited for such work, the old 5-stringer seems due for a comeback.

THIS MANUAL.....

....will not make a virtuoso out of anyone, but I have compressed into its few pages almost everything I know about playing the banjo.* With its help you can teach yourself to accompany many songs. And it will take you considerably shorter time than it took me. I picked up the instrument from many different people, in travelling through the country.

** For more historical data see Appendix 5

* ....and some I don't know.

THE BANJO LESSON by Henry Tanner

I would suggest that you leaf through this entire manual first, to see what its scope is. Beginners may have to ignore whole chunks; someone who already knows the rudiments of music can skip other parts if he likes. (Few would want to learn it all.)

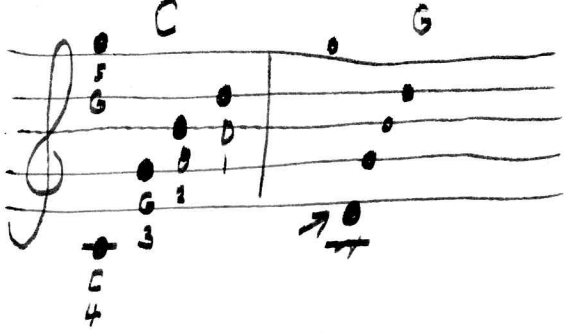
It may take you anywhere from a few months to a few years to work your way through, depending on how good an ear you have; how quickly your fingers can coordinate, and how continuously you play.

Get together with others who like to sing, and try running through the various folksongs, ballads, blues, and dance tunes I have given as examples. Don't think of yourself as "practicing" in the formal sense, but simply keep on playing a lot. As with tap-dancing, this banjo technique is nothing more than doing a few simple things over and over, till the whole procedure is fast and relaxed.

Folk tunes are used throughout as examples, to teach the instrument. I feel the banjo is most suited to them. However, I may be prejudiced - probably am - therefore please feel free to experiment.

This manual cannot itself teach you to play the banjo. It can, however, I hope, help you to teach yourself.

II

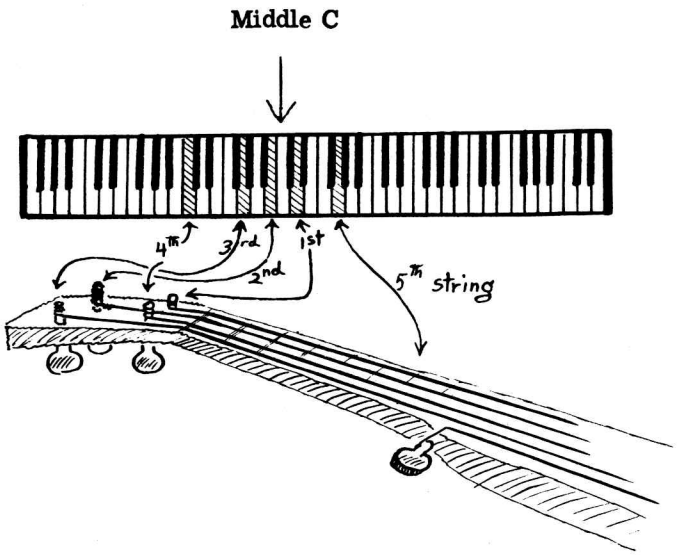


A Basic Strum

1) If you have never before played a banjo, check Appendix #1 to see how to take care of the instrument, and to learn the names of its various parts.

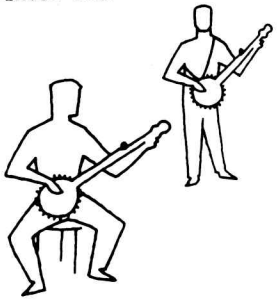
2) Tune up your banjo as follows:

5th string (the one running from the peg half way up the neck).	G	(4 notes (a "fifth") above middle C)
4th string (the one next to the 5th).	C	(one octave <u>below</u> middle C)
3rd (next to the 4th)	G	(3 notes (a "fourth") below middle C)
2nd (next to 3rd).	B	(one note below middle C)
1st.	D	(one note above middle C)

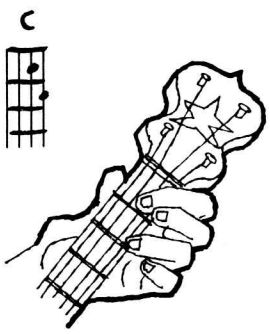


The above is the standard "C" tuning; there are other tunings you will learn later on.

3) Sit and hold the banjo somewhat in the manner shown at right. Keep the face of the drum vertical, the other end about level with your left shoulder. (Later you can fasten a strap to your brackets and play standing up, but it's easier to learn sitting down.)



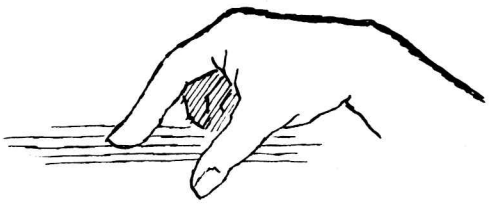
4) With your left hand make the following "chord". Your fingers should come down where the dots are, not directly on the fret, but "slightly south" of them. Do not let your fingertip touch more than one string now; press down <u>firmly</u> to get a clear tone.



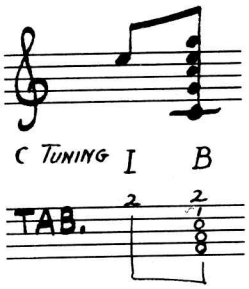
Make sure the fingernails of your left hand are very short, so that they do not hinder your fingers from fretting the strings firmly and cleanly. (See Appendix 5 about this).

5) With your right hand do as follows: the index finger should pluck up, sounding the lst string only. Then, with the other three fingers (ignore the thumb, for the moment) brush down across all five strings.

Try doing this regularly in march time: up, down, up, down; one, two, one, two . This is the basic strum.



The notes you are playing would look like this on music paper.



The letter "I" stands for the index finger of the right hand, plucking up.

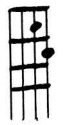
The letter "B" stands for the right hand brushing down across all strings. In actual practice I find myself using mostly my third "ring finger" for this. Other banjo players tend to use mostly the fingernail of their middle finger, or their index finger, as they brush down and across the strings. You will have to experiment for yourself, and decide which effect you prefer.

* * *

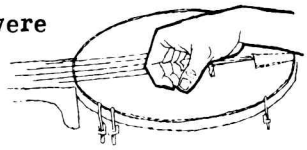
<u>HOW TO READ TABLATURE:</u>

The lower set of five horizontal lines does not represent a music staff. They are the five strings of the banjo. When a number is placed on a certain line, it means that string is sounded in some way, and the number represents the fret at which the left hand stops the string. Tablature was a system of music writing used by lute players in 16th Century Europe. This is a simplified version. If you cannot read music, you can still puzzle your way through this manual by reading the tablature.

Here's how. If your left hand were to make a C chord, thus,



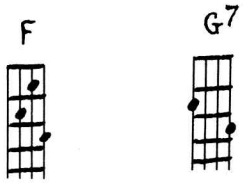
And if the right hand were to brush down across all five strings, thus,



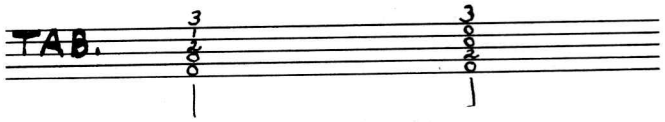
Tablature would describe it thus:

And if you wanted to play a scale (do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do), starting on the 4th string, and plucking each note with the index finger of the right hand, tablature would show it thus:

6) With your left hand, learn two more chords now:



Tablature would describe them this way



* * *

7) Knowing three chords, your way is now clear to accompany simple songs in the key of C. Don't bother learning any other chords as yet. Concentrate on getting a good easy rhythm out of your right hand. The following song I have written out. If you do not know how to read music yet (see Appendix IV) skip over this and don't spend too much time trying to puzzle it out. You'll find it a help to start learning, however, especially if you are studying this manual without the help of a teacher.

Position of left hand and name of chord being used.

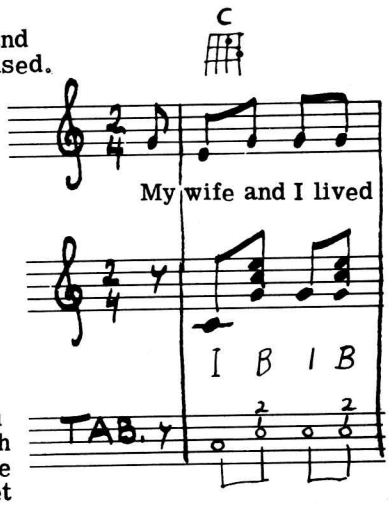
Melody being sung by the voice.

Words of song.

Notes being played by the banjo.

How the strings are sounded.

Tablature, to help you locate the string which is being sounded at the time, and at which fret the left hand stops the string ("O" stands for an open string.)



You can figure out the accompaniment to the rest of the verse yourself:

C F
But since our plant got organized

G7 C
We're living much more civilized.

(Complete song, "The Union Way", can be found in 'The People's Songbook'. Same tune as "Little Brown Jug".)

You'll note that throughout this manual I often neglect to write down any notes for the 4th string, the bass string, to play.

I've done this partly because in actual practice it is rarely sounded directly when the fingernails brush across the strings. Cluttering up the music staves and tablature with big four and five note chords actually would look misleading. But don't go to any great effort to avoid playing the 4th string, and when playing a G7 chord, continue to fret the 4th string with the left hand.

8) Here's another simple tune you know:

C G7
I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee
C G7 C
I'm going to Louisiana, my true love for to see
F C G7
O, Susanna, don't you cry for me
C G7 C
I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee

C
Lou, Lou, skip to my Lou
G7
Lou, Lou, skip to my Lou
C
Lou, Lou, skip to my Lou
G7 C
Skip to my Lou, my darling.

C G7
Hush, little baby, don't say a word
G7 C
Papa's going to buy you a mockingbird

C
There is a tavern in the town
G7
Where my love goes and sits him down
C F
And drinks his wine as merry as can be
G7 C
And never, never thinks of me

At this point the beginner should consider: the rhythm of a banjo is more important than its harmony or melody. This means that in learning one should concentrate more on the right hand than the left.

Did you ever see a drummer practicing on his little rubber pad? For hours on end he will beat the same patterns, first in one tempo and then another. He cannot be merely satisfied to know 'how' a certain rhythm is to be played. He must know it so well that he can practically do it in his sleep. He must be able to hold if necessary the same tempo through a piece. No distraction, no inept fellow player should be able to knock him off his course.

The banjo player's right hand must similarly learn each pattern of strumming and picking so well that he doesn't even need to think about it. Then, if he wants to sing a song, he can concentrate on the song without worrying about the details.

Best way to get this control over the rhythm is to play a lot, especially with other musicians. (Have you a friend who plays the guitar?)

9) Before we go on to the second lesson, a couple postscripts:

If you are left-handed, I think nevertheless you'd find it best not to reverse the tuning or playing position; it's almost impossible, considering the peculiar place of the fifth string peg.

Also, you will notice that in each lesson I put down some song in music notation. If you can't read it, you should get the LP record, "Five String Banjo Instructor" which is issued as a companion piece to this manual. Without this, or a good teacher, your best bet is then to start learning to read either notation or tablature.

Music notation is basically so simple, I'd advise anyone who doesn't know to make a trip to the music store and get some beginner's manual; I have given a few rudiments in Appendix 4; knowing how to read music will make learning from this manual much easier.

CHECK LIST FOR BEGINNERS

Here are some of the most likely things to go wrong if you are just starting.

Having trouble in getting in tune? Pluck the string constantly while you gradually turn the peg. Stop turning when your ear tells you you have reached the right pitch. Use a pitch pipe or piano to help you.

It won't stay in tune long? Check for faulty pegs. Or maybe your bridge is sliding around. Glue it down with a drop of Dupont cement along the side. Or maybe your drum is too loose.

Are your fingernails short on the left hand and long on the right? Check with Appendix 5.

Your banjo has poor tone? I'll bet either you have old strings on it, or, more likely the drum is loose, as is often the case with old instruments. Tighten it up right away!

Maybe other things are going wrong; check with Appendix 1 again.

III

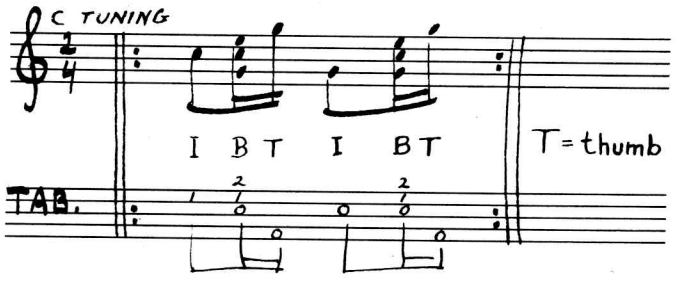
The Fifth String

The thing which gives this style of banjo playing its distinctive flavor is the unusual function of the 5th string. It's the "ring" of "hear those banjoes ringing". Like a triangle in an orchestra, it keeps on dinging away through a whole song, never changing in pitch.

The right thumb is practically always the finger that plucks the 5th string - that's why we call it the "thumb string".

In this basic strum we are learning now, the rhythm is still essentially the same as in Lesson 1. But instead of simply "one, two; one, two;" it is now "one, two-and; one, two-and;".....the "and" is where you pluck the 5th string.

> Say "bump-ditty, bump-ditty," over and over to yourself; that is the rhythm you're aiming at.



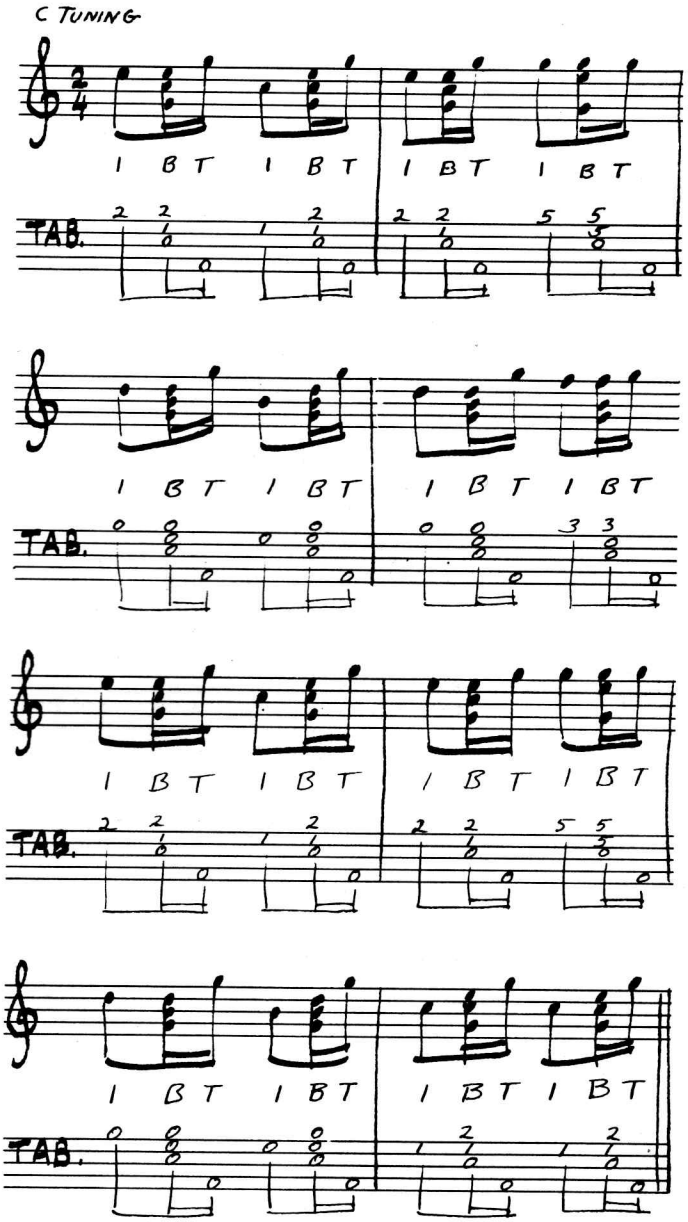
Now, the first line of the song on the previous page might be played like this. (T stands for "thumb".)

As you'll notice, the 5th string seems to come in on an off-beat. Kind of kicks off at the rear end of each beat. It never changes pitch, though strictly speaking it's not in harmony with some chords (try playing it with an F chord). Nevertheless for some curious reason, probably because it is so high up, it does not jar the ear. It's what composers call a "pedal point". Only if you play many "pop" songs, which use more than the three basic chords used by most American folksongs, will you occasionally find the wrong discords.

If you learn nothing but this one thing <u>well</u>, that's plenty for today's lesson. Play it over and over till it goes smoothly. Sing through the songs given in the previous chapter, and any others you know. Only now use the 5th string throughout.

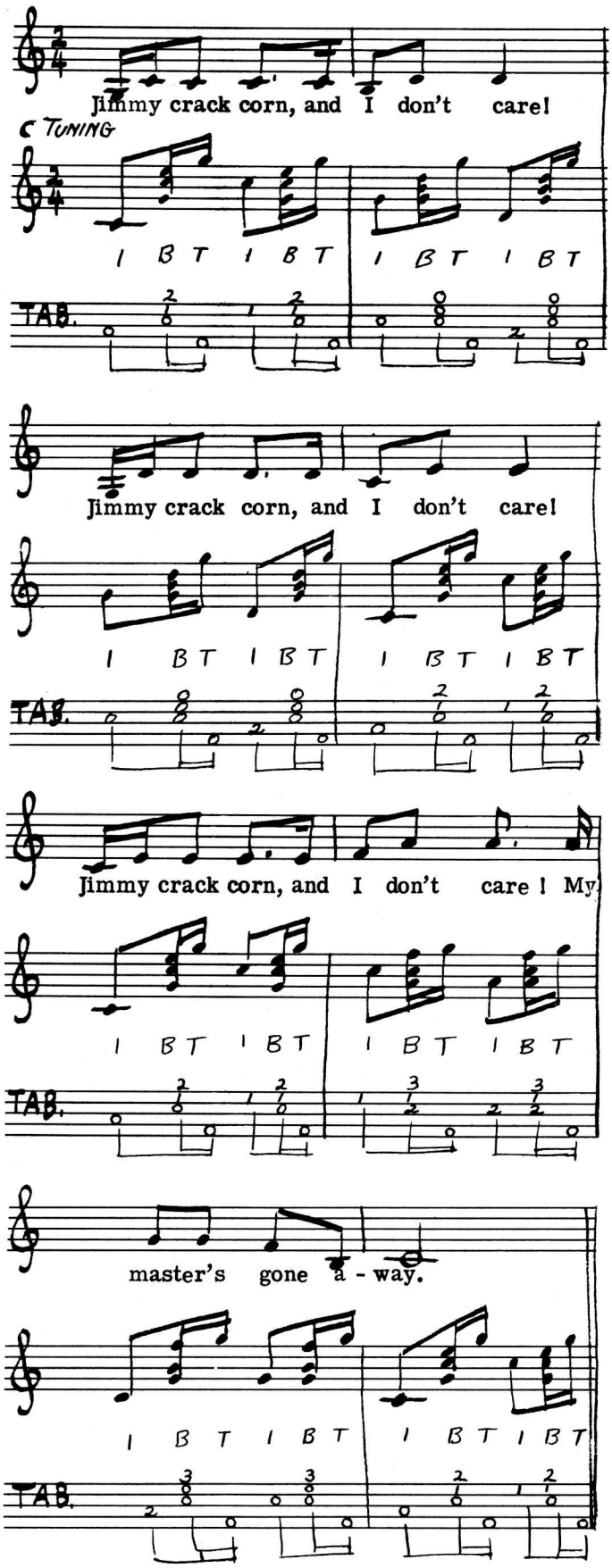
* * *

SKIP TO MY LOU



THE BLUE TAILED FLY

(Complete words and music in Kolb, "A Treasury Of Folk Songs". Bantam Books.)


Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care!
C TUNING
I BT I BT I BT I BT
TAB.
Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care!
I BT I BT I BT I BT
TAB.
Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care! My
I BT I BT I BT I BT
TAB.
master's gone a - way.
I BT I BT I BT I BT
TAB.

Usually when you are singing the verses of a song, you will keep the banjo down to a simple rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment. Sometimes, though, it is quite effective to have it play the melody in unison with the voice:

Other times you may want to work out a countermelody to what the voice is singing:

* * *

Harmony lesson: "What Is A Chord?"

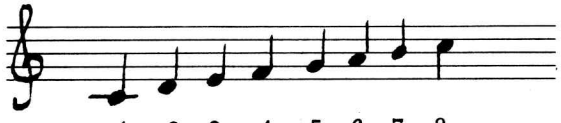
If you don't already know, I hope you are curious to find out exactly what are those "chords" (pronounced KORDS) I have been talking about . . . . . C, F, G, etc.

This is the first of several lessons which should give you a little of the music theory behind what you are learning. So here goes.

A song, besides having words, has melody, rhythm, and (when you have an accompaniment such as this banjo gives), harmony, which seems to reinforce, support, or otherwise back up the melody.

The harmony in our case is a series of several notes played together, which we call a chord.

Of course, just any three notes won't do. But try doing this: hum a scale to yourself, "do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do"...or..."one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight".



Now, run through the scale again, but sing out only on the 1st, 3rd, and 5th notes; put these three notes together, and you have a chord.

In fact, take the 1st, 3rd, and 5th of any major scale, and you have a major chord. (a minor chord differs only in that the 3rd is 1/2 tone lower).

If "1" is a C note, it's called a "C" chord (C,E,G,).

If the 1st note is G, it's a G chord.

Of course you can, and often do play the chord upside down: 3-5-1, or 5-1-3, or spread over several octaves: 1-5-3, or 5-3-1, or 3-1-5, or with some notes repeated: 1-5-1-3, 5-1-3-1, or 1-5-3-5, etc.

But in all these variations it is still a G chord, if "1" is a G note.

Try fingering a C chord on your banjo now. Play the 4th string alone; it's "C" isn't it? That happens to be the "1" of this chord. Now play the 3rd string alone, that "G", it is the "5" of the chord. (Count up to it and see). Then try the 2nd string; originally a B, you've fretted it up a 1/2 tone to C, so here's another "1". The 1st string, originally D, is now fretted up to E, which is the "3" of the chord.

Your 5th string, being a high G, is another "5". You see how all the notes together make a C chord? 1-5-1-3-5.

Exercise: Play the F and G chords and tell me which string fulfills which part of the chord. Answers at bottom of page (don't look till you've tried).

It will be of great help to you to train your ear to know which notes are which, in any chord. If you have a piano around, try making chords, starting on any note you hit at random. First play a scale up from your chosen note (let your ear tell you when and when not to play black notes). Then play only "1" "3" and "5". Try juggling the chords around, 'inverting' them. Incidentally, whatever note is "1" is known also as the 'root' of a chord.

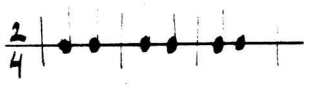
Summary: These chords, backing up your melody make all this mellifluous harmony you hear about. They can be added to, twisted, staggered, and juggled about, of course, to make it more interesting. More about this in future lessons.

ANSWERS: For an F chord,
the 4th string is "5" or C
the 3rd string is "3" or A
the 2nd string is "5" or C
the 1st string is "1" or F
and the 5th string is "9" or "2"
(G)- not in the chord, strictly
speaking, but this aberration
doesn't seem to matter.

For a G chord,
the 4th string is "5" or D
the 3rd string is "1" or G
the 2nd string is "3" or B
the 1st string is "5" or D
the 5th string is "1" or G

A LITTLE RHYTHM PRACTICE:

1) Try clapping 2/4 time, march rhythm.



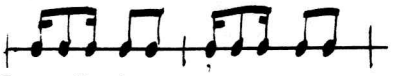
Do it over and over, emphasizing the first clap in each measure.

2) Now, if two 1/8 notes equal one 1/4 note, how would this sound:

Or this:

3) This would be simple:

4) But can you clap this?



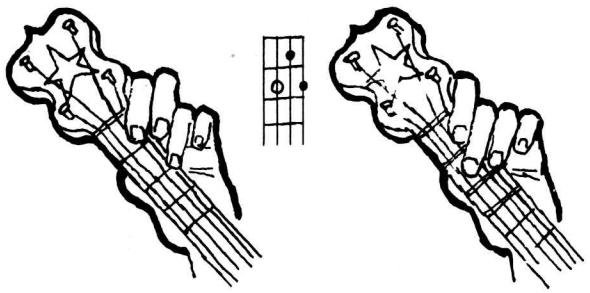
5) O.K. For a final exam:

IV

"Hammering on"

In playing the banjo you can get some notes with your left hand, believe it or not. One method is to fret a string so hard that you can hear it. This I call "hammering on".

For example, pluck the open 3rd string with your right forefinger, then immediately hammer down with the middle finger of your left hand on the 3rd string, just "south" of the second fret. If two other fingers were fretting a C chord, your middle finger would then be where the hollow dot is in this diagram.

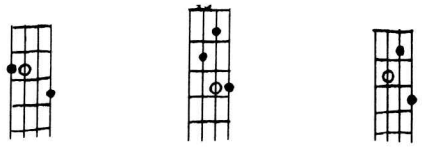


Then, as usual brush down on all your strings, and thumb the 5th string. Instead of sounding like "bump-ditty, bump-ditty" as in Lesson II, it should be more like "bumpa-ditty, bumpa-ditty", with the "pa" representing where you hammer down. On music paper it would look like this:

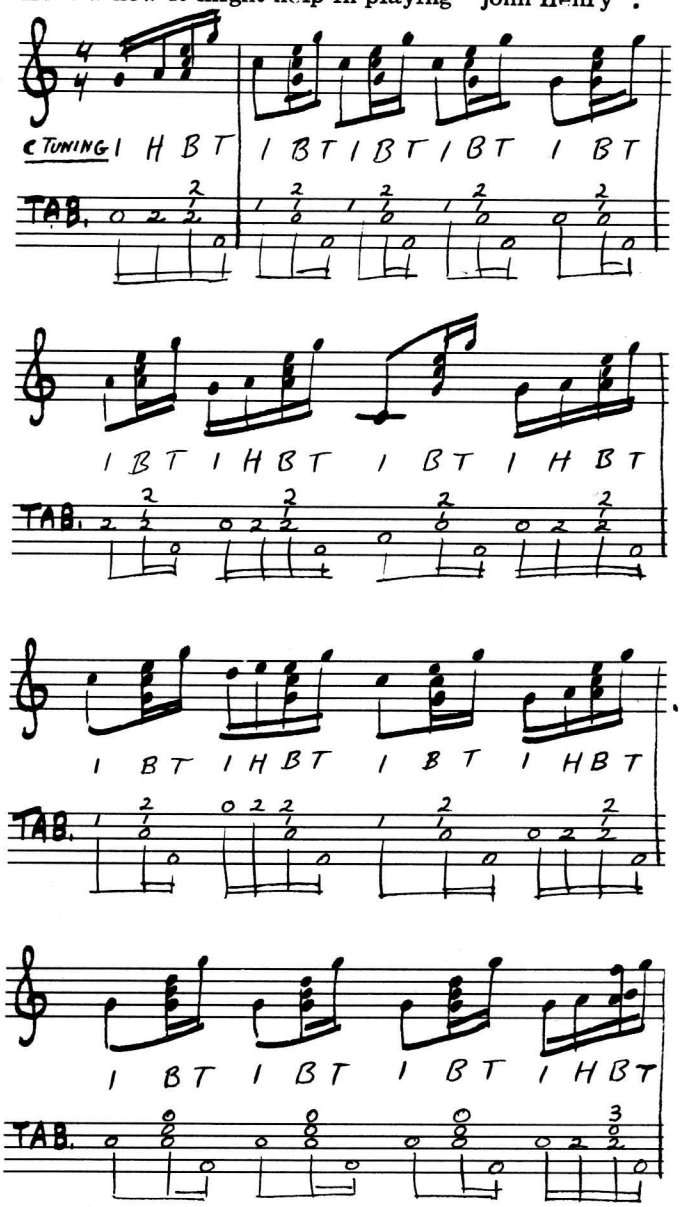
H = hammering on

Try this hammering on in the C chord at least till it goes smoothly and easily. Say the word "Chattanooga" over and over to yourself. That's the rhythm you're aiming at.

You can do this in many places and with many different chords. You have the general principle now. Experiment as you will.



Try accompanying as many songs as you can now, using this new lick. If you can contrive to have it help chart out the melody of a song, all the better. Here's how it might help in playing "John Henry".



.....and so on, for the rest of the song.

(Complete words to "John Henry" may be found in 'Folk Song USA', John and Alan Lomax.)

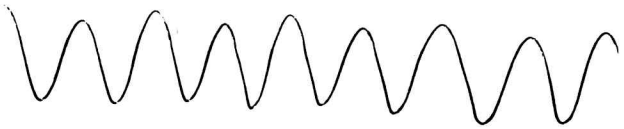
Harmony lesson: "What Is A Major Chord?"

Much of music theory, since it's been evolved through centuries of tradition, is completely illogical - like the clothes we wear and the food we eat, all based less upon science than upon custom. But some aspects of harmony are precise, and mathematically logical.

To illustrate: only custom dictates when or where we play a chord, but there is a very mathematical reason why the 1-3-5 of a major chord sounds pretty, and three miscellaneous other notes may not. Here's why:

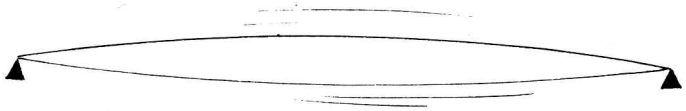
First, you know that the tone you hear is the vibration of the banjo string, transmitted by the bridge to the drum, thus to the air, and thus to our eardrums. (An A note, for example, is 440 vibrations per second).

However, rarely is a tone's vibration purely and simply that of its basic pitch; there will be minor vibrations which we call overtones. In other words, a soundwave is liable not to look so much like this:



.....as this:

In the case of a vibrating string you can test this principle, and see for yourself that a string not only vibrates in one piece:



But in two pieces, or three, or more, all at the same time.

Here's how: take a knife handle and rest it crosswise on the string, as a Hawaiian guitar player would. Rest it in the exact center (12th fret) - you'll now get a note just one octave higher. Rest it 1/3 the way from a bridge (use a yardstick to measure). Now you'll get a note one 5th higher. Rest it 1/4 way from the bridge, and your note will be two full octaves higher than the open string was. And try it one fifth the way from the bridge; it will be still a third higher!

These are the principle overtones you hear without realizing it when you pluck a string. Put them all together, and what have you? 1-1-5-1-3..... a major chord! Of course, there are more overtones, higher up (listen to any deep bell, and you'll hear hundreds of them).

Do you see now why the 1-3-5 notes of any scale seem to make a nice sound together? It is because the 3 and the 5 reinforce the overtones of the 1, the basic note.

Incidentally, further illustration of this business of overtones can be seen in the case of the bugle. In blowing harder and pursing his lips tighter, the bugler simply gets the long column of air inside the brass tube to vibrate not in three pieces, but in four, then five, then six pieces. He gets a higher note each time, of course, notes which when put together from a major chord.

WHEN NOT TO PLAY THE BANJO

Obviously, when someone is trying to get the baby to go asleep. Nor when your neighbor, who has to be up at 6 AM to go to work, is trying to catch some much needed shut-eye.

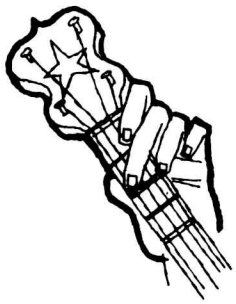
There are other times as well, in which a sensitive musical ear can tell you to lay aside the instrument. Some types of music, after all, were simply not made for it. This goes especially for certain types of slow songs, whose effect will be spoiled by the sharp punctuation of the banjo strings.

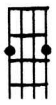
Furthermore, in accompanying yourself in a song, you will often find it desirable to stop playing for a whole phrase, and let the voice stand alone. Then when the banjo rejoins you, it will be ever more welcome.

V

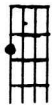
"Pulling off"

The left hand can also make notes by actually plucking a string (usually works most easily on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd strings). Try it. I call it "pulling off".* You put this note in the same place you would put a note gained by hammering down. Thus, try pulling off on the 1st string. First, fret the 1st string two frets up, thus:

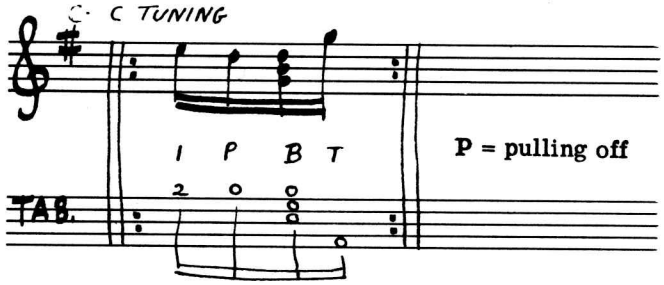




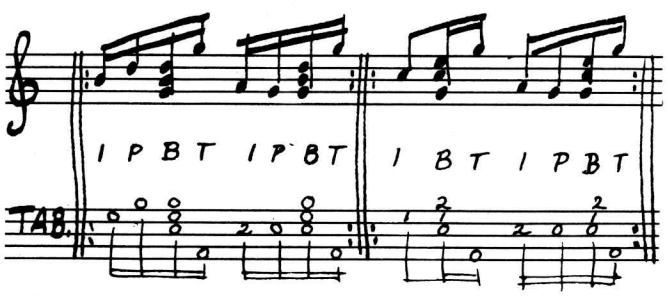
Then pull away with the ring finger of your left hand, thus sounding the first string.



Follow through with brushing down and thumbing the fifth string. You would get something which on music paper would look like this:

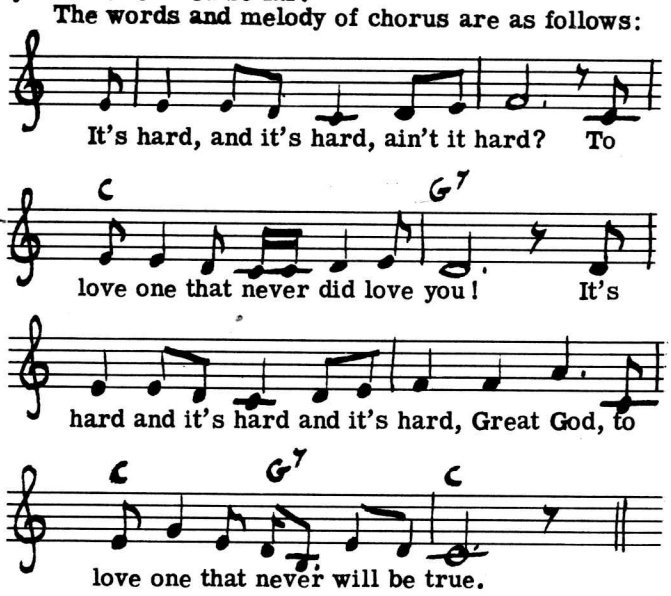


Getting a little tricky now, try this (note always which string is being plucked):

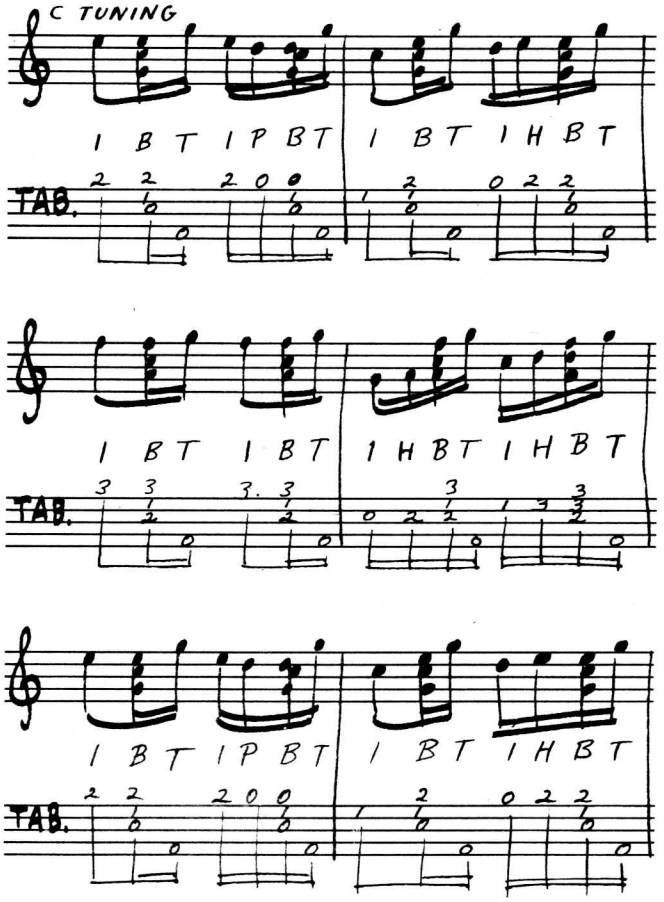


Here is a concrete piece to try out everything you have learned so far.

The words and melody of chorus are as follows:

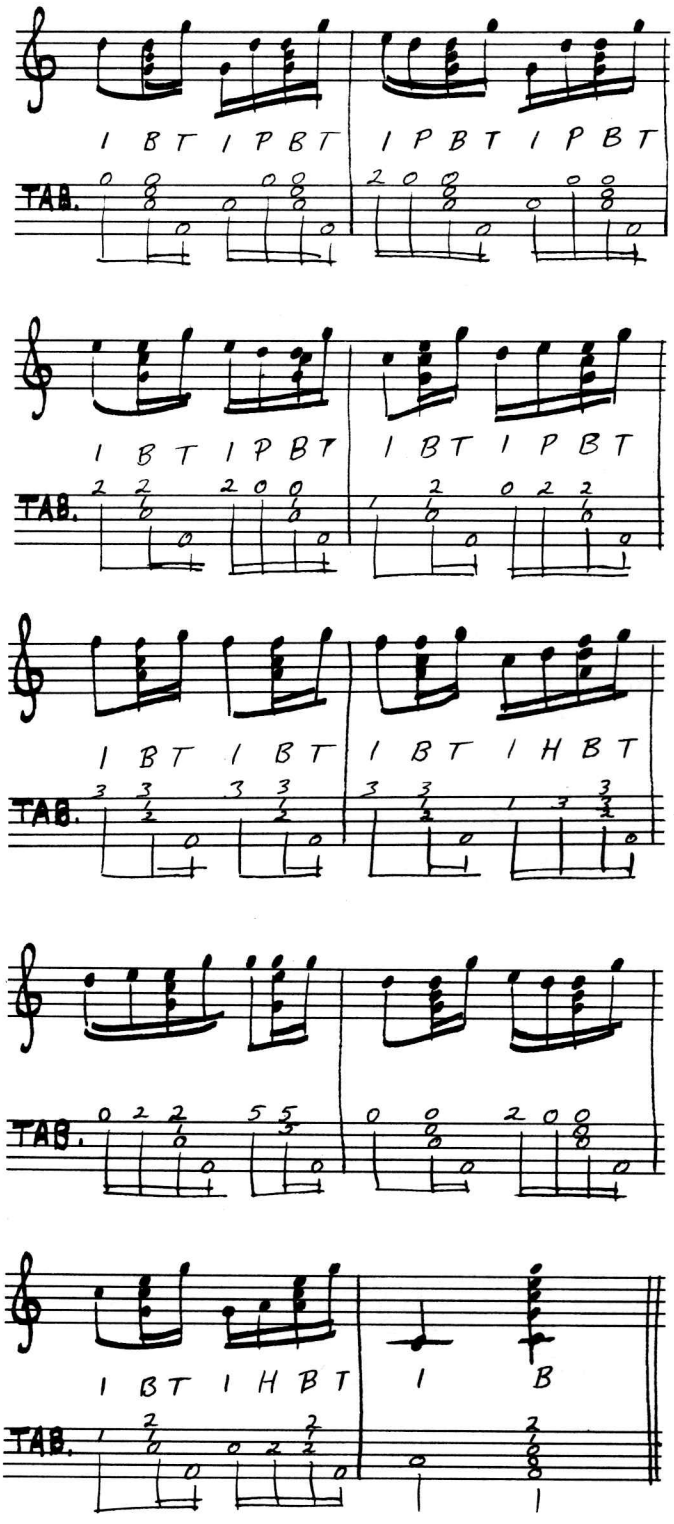

It's hard, and it's hard, ain't it hard? To
C
G7
love one that never did love you! It's
hard and it's hard and it's hard, Great God, to
C
G7
C
love one that never will be true.

Meanwhile, the banjo might play it this way:



(Complete words and music to "Hard, Ain't It Hard" as sung by Woody Guthrie and by the Weavers, can be ordered from Folkways Music, 151 West 46 Street, New York, N.Y.

* Violinists call this "Left Hand Pizzicato".



Harmony lesson: 6th's, 7th's, etc.

These extra notes you are adding are not always in the "1-3-5" of our original major chord. In fact, if you'll analyze it, you'll see that when you hammer down in C, you are adding the 6th note of a C scale. That extra note is an A. Count up from C and check it:

C-D-E-F-G-A
1-2-3-4-5-6

When an A is added to a C chord, then we call it a C^6 chord. There are also C^7, C^9 and even C^{13}. Look up Appendix 2 and check and few of them.

You can also lower the "3" of any major chord a 1/2 tone, and it becomes a minor chord. (Compare C and Cm, F and Fm, etc).

For additional changes, see Appendix 2. Right now, I would urge you learn G^7 and D^7, and try the following exercise: Joe Hill.

JOE HILL

By Earl Robinson and Alfred Hayes. Complete words and music in "Lift Every Voice"

C F
I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you and
C C F C
me..... Says I, but Joe, you're ten years dead; "I
D^7 G^7 G^7 C
never died," says he..... "I never died," says he...

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Use all the tricks you have so far learned; hum the melody and finger the right chords with your left hand.

Incidentally, in plucking up on your single string, making the main note of your strum, try moving around a bit, using either the string which seems to sound best for a bass note, or one which becomes part of the melody. Sometimes you can play almost a complete tune with only the notes plucked up by your right index finger.

The reader may wonder at the author's annoying habit of not giving complete songs as examples. There are several reasons for this. One is the author's natural laziness. Another is lack of space in this book, which is already twice as big as it was supposed to be. More than this though, I hope the reader will be goaded into working out his own arrangements. I mention books where the rest of the words and music may be found. They're good books. It's worth a trip to the public library to look them up.

VI

Double Thumbing

While the basic strum which you have presumably mastered by now is fine for simple accompaniments, and "chording" along, you may at times want to play a little more melody and fewer chords. In the middle of a song it is quite easy to break into the following, which I call "double thumbing".

(For practice sake finger a C chord with your left hand)

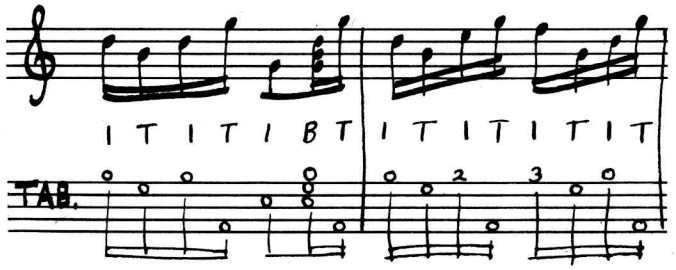
1 - pluck up on the first string, with right index finger
2 - with your right thumb pluck down on the second string
3 - pluck the first string again as before
4 - thumb the fifth string

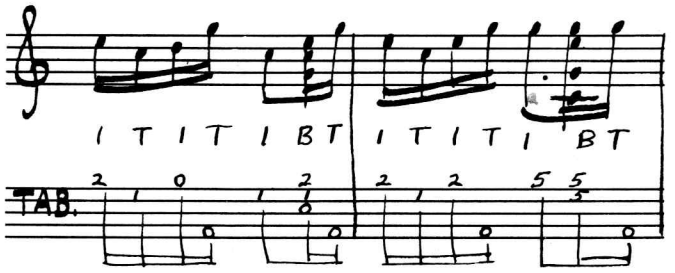
Play these four notes over and over till they go smoothly. After a while your speed will increase so you can go from straight strumming into double thumbing without a drop in rhythm.

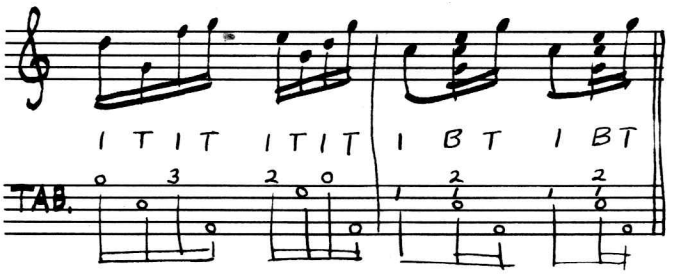
On music paper the above would look like this:

SKIP TO MY LOU

Now, nere is the song "Skip To My Lou" written out for a lot of double thumbing, with an occasional strumming of chords to keep the rhythm going.







It is an example of why good banjo playing has a nice, sparkling, lively quality. The melody is there, all right, but it is surrounded by a myriad of other notes. A kaleidoscopic effect is created, a brilliantly patterned carpet against which the melody carried by a voice is shown off well.

RETUNING TO PLAY IN 'G'

So far I have taught you only songs that are in the key of C (and using only the chords C,F, and G).

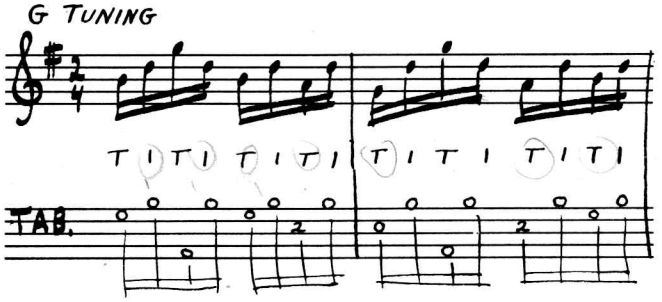
If you want to play in the key of G, you'll find it convenient to actually retune the instrument slightly, and use the "G tuning".

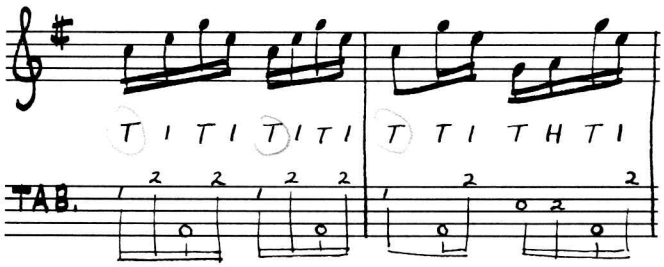
Simply tighten your 4th string one whole tone up from C to D. Brushing your hand across the open strings should give you now simply a straight G major chord. Appendix II gives you the slightly different chord figures you'll need to use for this tuning.

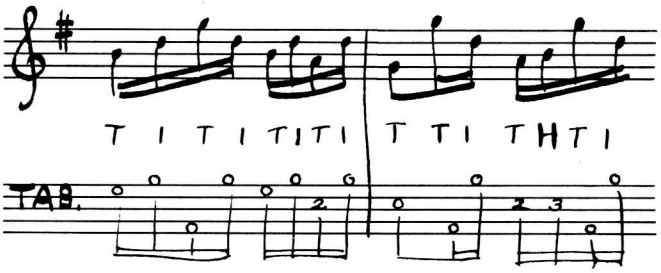
This business of retuning to play in a different key is common with folk musicians in many parts of the world. Don't think of it as "cheating"; without retuning, some pieces would be impossible to play. Even Segovia retunes a bass string occasionally.

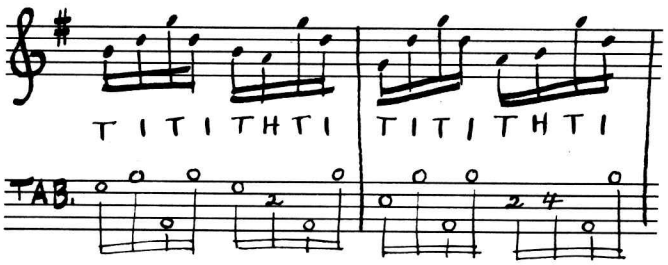
Try playing some of the below tunes in the G tuning.

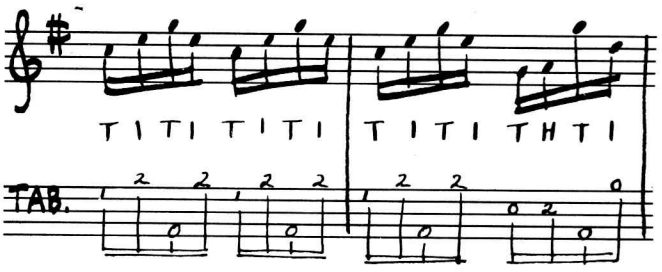
This first song is all "double thumbing".

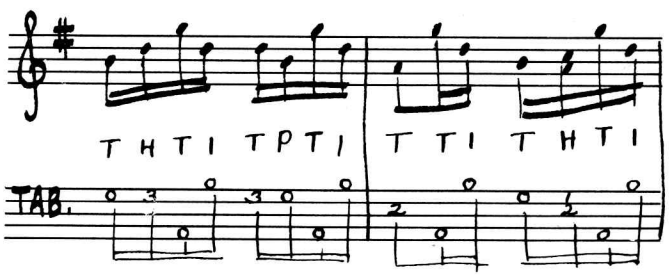






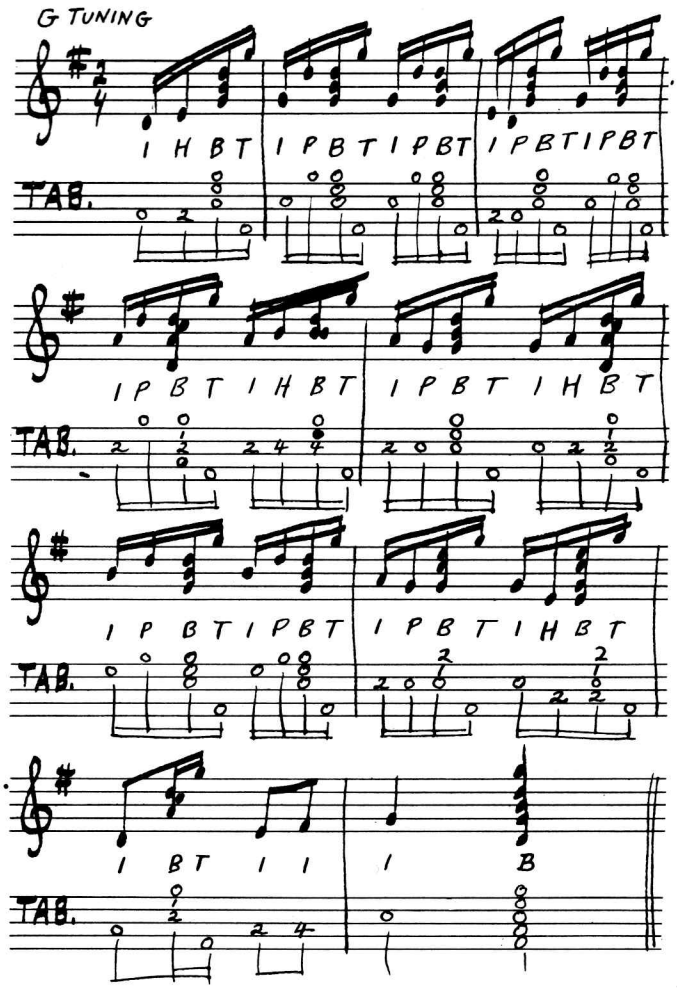






(Do you recognize the tune? It's the same one you played a few pages back in the key of C, "Hard, Ain't It Hard".)

Now try another song in the G tuning, but back in our first style of strumming. You'll recognize it right away: "Old Time Religion".



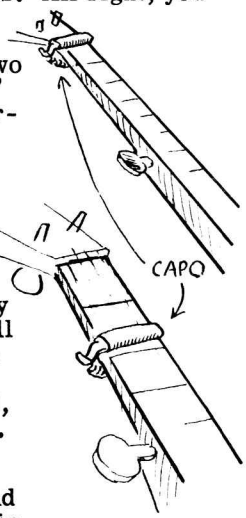
* * *

HARMONY LESSON: THE CAPO

If you have not already bought a banjo capo, do so now - they cost only a few cents. With its help you can very simply play a song in any key you want.

For supposing you are a tenor or soprano, and in your songbook you find some song written, say, in

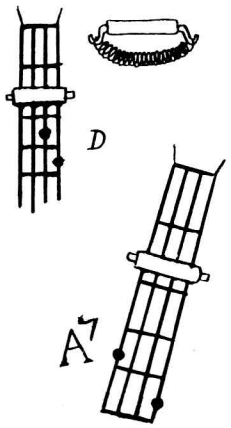
the key of C - and it seems too low for your voice. You'd rather sing it in D, perhaps. All right, you have a capo already around the neck of your banjo, as shown at right. Just move it up the neck two frets, letting it rest just "south" of the frets, where you would normally put your fingers.



Now retune your 5th string a similar amount higher (from G to A).

Now you can go ahead and play the song in C, except that you will really be in a key more suited to your voice, the key of D. When your left hand makes a G^7 chord, you'll really be in A^7, and so on.

If the key of C is too high for your voice, on the other hand, and you'd rather sing the song down in A, retune to a "G tuning", and move the capo up two frets and play G, C, and D^7 chords - but really you'll be playing A, D, and E^7 chords.



It's like Irving Berlin's famous piano, which he had specially built; he cranks the keyboard up and down, so he can pitch a tune just right for his voice - although he himself can only play in one key.

I myself practically never play except in G or C - and with the use of a capo, can make it come out E♭, or G♯, or anything else needed. Again, don't think of it as 'cheating'.

One note: the fifth string will break if you try to tighten it up much more than one tone higher than its originally intended pitch. Therefore you will have to put a small screw in the fingerboard, under which you can slip the string, artificially fretting it. See Appendix 3.

Also, if the cork padding on your capo wears out (it will), cut off a short piece of bathroom shower hose and slip it over the bar. It works even better. Some use a similar tube to keep the spring from scratching varnish off the neck.

To prove to yourself just how important it is to sing in the right key, take any song you know and try singing it in as many keys as your capo and two banjo tunings can give you. You'll rapidly see that some are completely impossible. Either you growl and whisper on the low notes, or squeak on the high ones. Of the few practical keys, you'll find the lower ones are best if you want to sing softly, calmly. But if you want to sing more spiritedly, or loudly, you'll pitch the song higher. People always sing higher when out-of-doors, for example.

When learning a song, one of your first jobs is therefore to find where to pitch it so that it suits your voice - and if you want others to sing with you, where it suits <u>their</u> voices.

....THREE OLDTIMERS

Above, right, is Samantha Bumgarner, the first person I ever heard play the 5-string banjo. It was at the Asheville Folk Festival, in 1935.

Above, left, is Rufus Crisp, of Allen, Kentucky, who taught me frailing.

Below is a picture of the late 'Uncle' Dave Macon, in a characteristic pose. In the 1890's he performed in travelling tent shows. During the last twenty years of his life he was a regular feature on the "Grand Old Opry" radio programs. His repertoire ranged from centuries-old ballads and courting tunes, to comic ditties, work songs, topical songs about striking coalminers and sharecropping farmers, hymns and gospel songs. May he liven up the heavenly band!

VII

Frailing

Up until now we have spent all our time learning one basic method of strumming with the right hand. Let's try another method now, one which is even more commonly used. It's good for playing a fast, steady rhythm for square dances. I've heard it variously called "beating" a banjo, "frailing" or "framing" the banjo.

Essentially the difference between the two methods is this: whereas in the first method the right hand "up, down, up, down", in frailing, all notes are plucked by the back of the fingernail as the hand moves downward, thus the movements of the right hand are all "down, down, down, down".

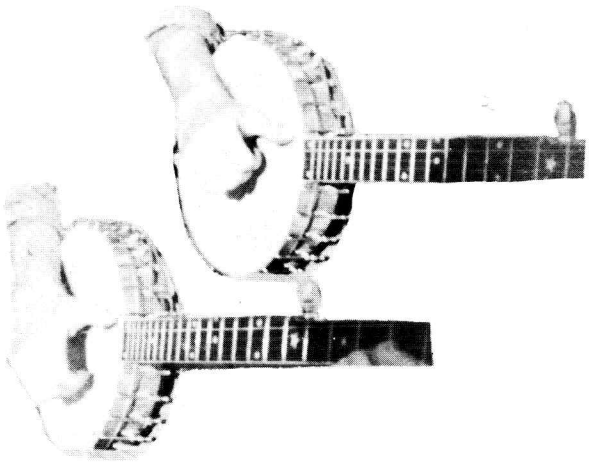
The notes you are playing may be exactly the same on paper as before, but you'll find they sound differently. You can get a good deal more incisive punch and attack when you frail a banjo.

Here's a blow-by-blow comparison of the two systems:

Basic Strum:	Frailing:
1) The index finger plucks up on a single string.	1) With the back of the fingernail of the index (or middle) finger, pick down on a string.
2) The left hand hammers on or pulls off on a string.	2) Same as in 1st method - left hand hammering on or pulling off.
3) The right hand brushes down across all the strings.	3) The right hand picks down across all strings (or possibly just the first two or three) and at the same time the right thumb comes to rest on the 5th string.
4) The thumb plucks the 5th string.	4) While the right hand is on the way up, the thumb pulls away from the 5th string, sounding it.

It took me about three or four months to get this down smoothly, so don't be impatient. What seems hardest is to learn to place your thumb on the 5th string on the way down, and plucking it on the way up. You might try doing that one thing over and over, as an exercise, till it comes easy:

1) Brush down across all strings with back of index finger, at same time placing thumb on 5th string.
2) On the way back, pluck 5th string. .....do this over and over.



If you haven't already studied Appendix 5, do so now. You cannot frail a banjo properly unless your fingernails are the right length, or you wear fingerpicks.

Frailing works out best for 2/4 time, fast. It's less useful for other rhythms.

Double thumbing can also be done in this new system. It's much harder at first, but in the end you can do it quicker and more definitely than the other way.

FOR PRACTICE try playing some of the following measures over and over again:

Now try this whole tune ("Cripple Creek", one of the world's best banjo tunes).

(On these slides you see above, move the left hand firmly up the fingerboard. Fret the string for the lower note, and without releasing pressure, move it up two frets.)

* * *

In the C tuning, you might try "John Henry". Incidentally, the traditional way to sing a ballad such as this is to play it through once or twice on the banjo, and then sing a verse, with the banjo just playing simple chords, and rather quietly, at that, so as not to drown out the words.

* * *

HARMONY LESSON: Minor Modes and Different Tunings

You may not have realized it, but there are many different kinds of major and minor scales. They're called "modes", and we are liable to run across them now mostly in folkmusic. One in particular is very common in parts of the southern mountains, and there is a particularly charming tuning which is used accompanying songs in this mode. Here it is:

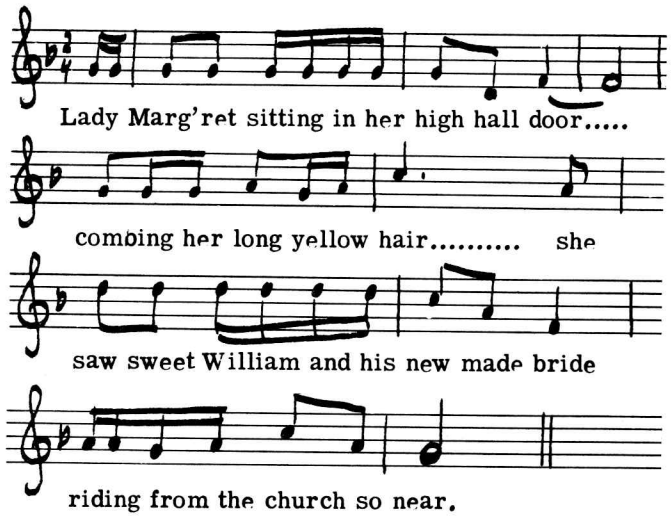
First put your banjo in a G tuning: GDGBD. Now raise the 2nd string from B to C (a half tone), and there you are: GDGCD.

Remember, you have to change all your chords now, to compensate for the change. Folk musicians do this, however, in order to play tunes that would

be impossible otherwise. Some banjo players invent new tunings as they need them, and a particularly successful one is imitated. Rufus Crisp, of Allen, Kentucky, knew some eighteen.

This next is an old Child ballad I first heard sung by Bascom Lunsford, at Asheville, North Carolina. You can hear him sing it on an Ethnic Folkways LP recording (see Appendix 6).

He tuned his banjo $_{G}$DGCD and used a style of picking that was mostly double thumbing. The melody and words of the first verse are something as follows:


Lady Marg'ret sitting in her high hall door.....
combing her long yellow hair..... she
saw sweet William and his new made bride
riding from the church so near.

(Complete words to this ballad are printed in the brochure accompanying the LP "Smoky Mountain Ballads", sung and played by Bascom Lunsford. Ethnic Folkways Recordings, 117 West 46 Street, New York, N.Y.

And here is the way the banjo adapted it.

In the Archives of American Folksong in the Library of Congress I once heard an extraordinary banjo tune called "I was born and raised in East Virginia". I have recorded it as best I can in the LP "Darling Corey". (Again, see Appendix 6). In between each verse occurs a run where the left hand plays as many notes as the right.

The tuning is again $_{G}$DGCD

(Complete words and music to "I Was Born In East Virginia" have been transcribed from the Library of Congress record, and are printed in Lomax, "Our Singing Country".)

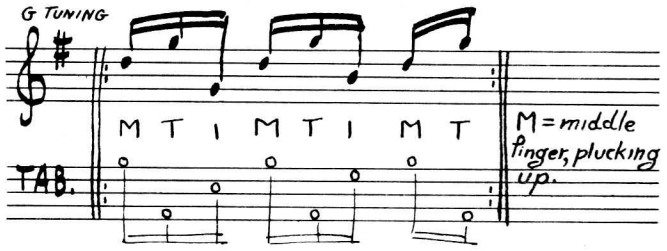
VIII

Three Finger Picking or "Clawhammer" Style

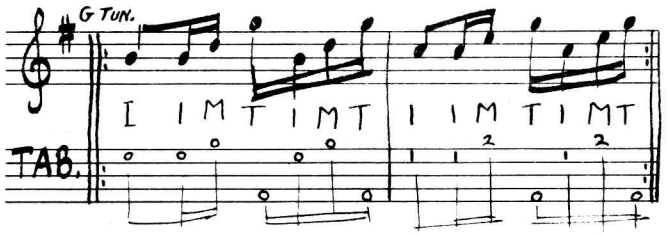
If you are able to play often with other musicians, such as guitarists, you will increasingly want to vary your style from a simple playing of chords. Guitars do this well enough without assistance. Rather, you will delight in the sparkling punctuation of a single banjo string, heard through everything else.

To do this you may try more double thumbing (Chapter VI) or single string work (Chapter X) But it is hard to beat the syncopated brilliance of the style best heard on the records of Earl Scruggs (See Appendix 6). It is lightning -fast, hard-as-nails, and is most popular right now in the southern mountains. It involves three fingers of the right hand, in picking.

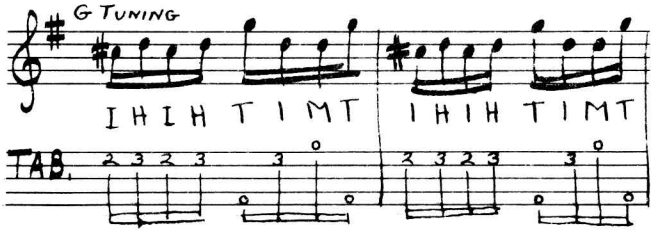
For the moment, forget about your left hand, which does not have to learn much new. Using thumb, index finger, and middle finger of the right hand, try this.



As you see, the eight 1/16th notes are continually being divided up, (as in the Rhumba, and other African-derivated rhythms,) into 3-3-2. Now try this:



And here is still another development of the same idea:



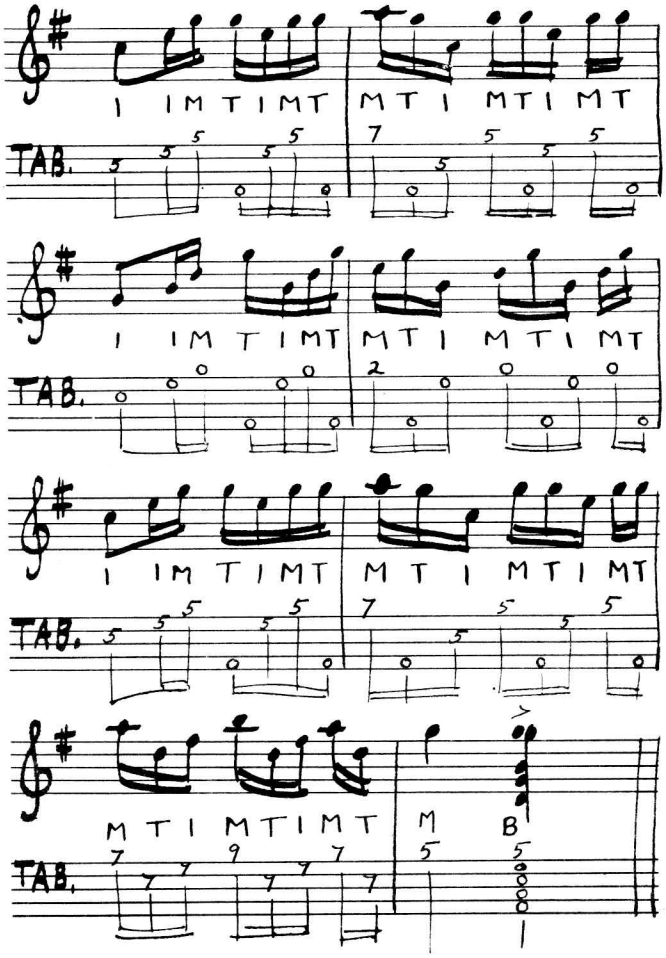
Or this:

There are many other possible variations. One can reverse the order of the three, for example: Thumb, Middle finger, then Index finger. What it boils down to is that in playing along in the background with other musicians, you let them take the basic, or 'straight' beat while you outline the chords or countermelodies in irregular fashion. (Other instruments playing with you are almost essential, if this 3-finger style is to sound at its best).

And if you play a melody, you must adopt it in a syncopated way, quite different from the way you had to adopt it to frailing, for example. Here is the familiar melody, 'Cindy' done Scruggs style.

CINDY

(Complete words and melody in Kolb, "A Treasury Of Folk Songs").



More than in the other methods of strumming which you have seen in previous chapters, you will want to play high up the neck. With ingenuity, some quite extraordinary effects can be tossed off.

Here the 2nd string is fretted at the 10th fret, and then at the same time pushed to one side by the left hand, thus raising it in pitch. A blues technique.

As in any way of playing the banjo, rhythm is almost of more importance than any single other thing. Until you are sure, crystal-clear sure, don't speed up too fast. Learn how emphasizing different strings gives you control over the syncopation.

Above all, keeping in mind that your end all object is not a shallow show-offishness, learn to integrate all this into the main body of music, so that it says what you want to say.

IX

A style of strumming when you're in a crowd and have to make lot of noise

1) Pick down on the 4th and 5th strings with the back of your middle finger (using a pick).

2) Hammer on or pull off with the left hand.

3) Brush across strings 1,2, and 3, with the back of middle finger.

4) Brush up across all five strings with the index finger. You'll see this stroke takes the place of the 5th string.

Try this over and over, and your hand should work out an easy roll which should make it possible to play this for a long period of time (dances, etc.).

If the music is slow (swing time, or blues), the above can be modified as follows:

1) Pick down as before on the 4th and 5th strings, with back of middle finger.

2) Again pick down on 4th and 5th strings with back of middle finger.

3) Brush down across strings 1, 2, and 3 as before with back of middle finger.

4) Brush up across all strings with index finger.

You'll find the above strum very handy, because in addition to being fairly loud (a quality you'll need occasionally, believe me) it has a certain amount of subtlety in it, making it far more pleasant to the ears than a straight "bang, bang, bang" down across all strings.

For waltz time, it could be modified as follows:

1) a - Brush down on the 4th and 5th strings with the back of your middle finger.
   b - Hammer on or pull off with the left hand.

2) a - Brush across strings 1, 2, and 3, with the back of middle finger.
   b - Brush up across all five strongs with the index finger.

3) a - (Repeat as in 2a).
   b - (Repeat as in 2b).

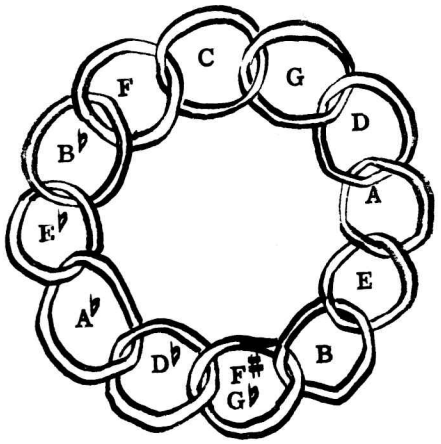
HARMONY: "THE CHAIN OF CHORDS"

You may already have discovered that all these various chords you've been playing have a very definite relation to one another. Any song, based in, say the key of C, and using the C chord more often than any other, will nevertheless use the same other chords with it.

There is a reason for this. True, as I pointed out before, much of music is simply illogical tradition, and in other centuries we find other chords much more popular than the ones we use most nowadays. But there is also a very mathematical relationship between all the major chords we use.

For example, what are the chords most closely related to C? Not C♯ or C♭, as you might think, but G, and F. Here's the reason: G is five notes above C, F is five notes below (or 4 above, depending on which direction you count). Since we know that the first harmonic overtone above the octave is a 5th, this looks logical. In other words, one of the first harmonic overtones to a middle C note is a high G.

Now, watch this: If we keep counting up five notes each time, we find that we will name eventually each of the 12 notes in the chromatic scale (white and black keys together), and end right up where we started, at C. I call it the chain of chords, and diagram it like this:



If you will travel around this chain clockwise, you'll perceive that each link is five notes above the previous one.

Now, this is important. 85% of the songs we sing, follow this rule: No matter what key a song is in, the other chords used in that song will be mostly in the links right next door. In other words, if you are playing a song in the key of E♭, the chords you'll use mostly will be A♭ and B♭. Musicians have names for these chords. They say that if a song is in, say, D, then D is the Tonic (chord). And the link to the right. A, is the Dominant (chord), and the link to the left, G, is the Subdominant. Thus, in the key of E, E is the tonic, B the dominant, and A the subdominant. You'll find it handy to use these terms.

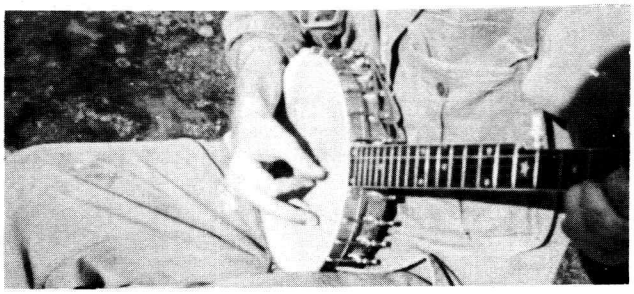
It is important to remember this, and important, too, to keep referring to this chain of chords until you have memorized it. Because when you start playing songs in keys like B♭, E, and so on, you want to be able to translate the chords I have listed in appendix II, for C, F, G, and D, into the chords you'll need for these new keys.

For example, suppose your song is in B♭. You run your capo up 3 frets, and use the G tuning. Above the music you see printed E♭7. You should know from your chain of chords that E♭ is the subdominant of B♭ ..... you'll just look for your C7 chord. With the capo three frets up, it will come out E♭7.

X

3 Miscellaneous Postscripts

1) If you ever want to play a fast melody alone, with no chords or other accompaniment whatsoever, you can do it with thumb and forefinger. Sometimes the use of another finger will help, and maybe you can get some extra notes by pulling off with the left hand. But try the following, and you will see what I mean:



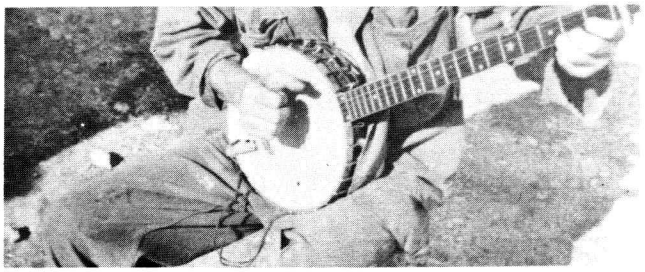
2) If you ever want to play a tremolo, a nice, steady one can be made with the right index finger, brushing back and forth lightly over a string or two.

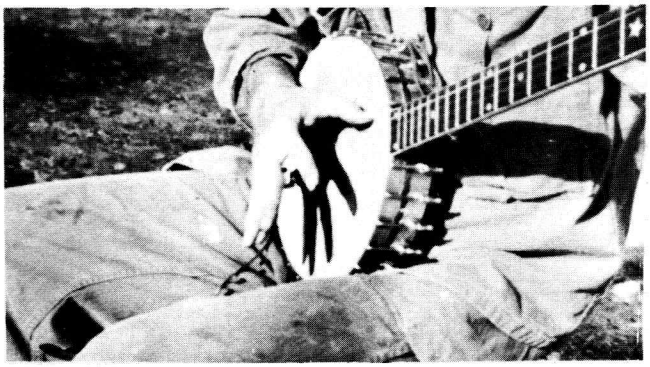
Hold the hand as shown. The little finger and the ring finger are braced against the drum. The thumb is braced against the joint of the index finger, high enough so that the latter can move freely.

It's easiest if the index finger doesn't cross the string perpendicularly, but on a slant (the same as that of the right forearm). This makes it less liable for the fingernail to catch on the string.

You'll find it easiest to make a tremolo on the 1st or 2nd string (or both at once); its harder on the 3rd or 4th without sounding nearby strings by mistake.

3) A roll is a special banjo effect good for ending off a song. Start with all fingers of the right hand doubled up as shown. Then start unwinding the little finger first, next the ring finger, next the middle finger, next the index finger, till the hand looks as shown at bottom. It all happens quite fast. In one "zroomm!" one can make a considerable racket. On a Spanish guitar they call this the "rasgado".





XI

3/4 and 6/8 time

Up to now all our practice examples have been in simple 2/4 or 4/4 time, fast or slow. However, at least two other rhythms are very common in American folkmusic, and you'd best become acquainted with them.

First, 3/4, or waltz time; for this you simply repeat the second stroke in strumming, as follows:

1) a-pluck up on a single string, with index finger.
   b-hammer down or pull off with left hand.
2) a-brush down across all strings.
   b-thumb the fifth string.
3) a-brush down across all strings.
   b-again thumb the 5th string.

This can be done fast or slow, of course. Here is a typical example of 3/4 time ("Down In the Valley"), which I can have written down to make use of double thumbing as well.

DOWN IN THE VALLEY

Try working out "On Top of Old Smoky" yourself. The chords are as follows:

C F C
On top of old smoky.....all covered with snow.....

G7 C
I lost my true lover.....for courting too slow...etc.

6/8 time is the same as that of an Irish Jig, such as "The Irish Washer Woman". "Johnny Comes Marching Home" is also in 6/8 time. You may even find it handy to use this method for certain marches, such as "John Brown's Body".

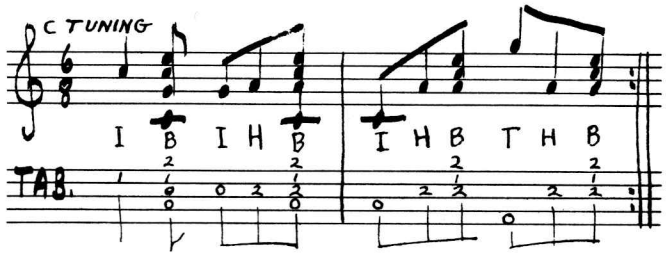
In 6/8 time there are two strong beats to each measure, but each beat is divided into three pieces, thus: one-two-three, four-five-six; one-two-three, four-five-six.

On the banjo, you'll find it difficult to play much melody in 6/8 time; the most you can hope for is to get the rhythm and the chords, and an occasional note of the melody.

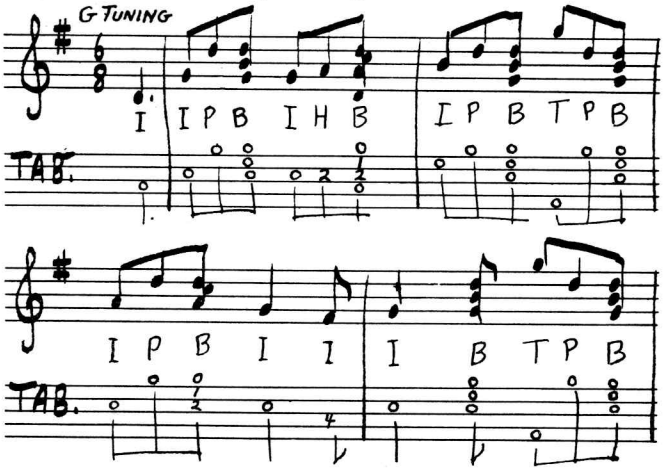
Forget about using the 5th string in its former capacity; if you pluck it at all, it will be as a downbeat, not an offbeat.

The strum should be as follows:

1) a-pluck up with the index finger on a single string
   b-hammer on or pull off with the left hand
   c-brush down across all strings
2) a-pluck up with index finger on a single string
   b-hammer on or pull off with the left hand
   c-brush down across all string



Here is a sample passage (can be used for "Rambling Wreck From Georgia Tech" - although G is a bad key to sing it in. C's better).



Most Americans have a poorly developed sense of rhythm (compared to people in Asia, Africa, South America, etc.) So see if you can test yourself, leafing through a songbook, guessing what time different songs are in. How many songs do you know in 6/8 time?

While 6/8 time is the same time as an Irish Jig, a hornpipe, though written as 4/4 time, is very similar, and can be played the same way. A hornpipe is really just 6/8 very fast. Occasionally you'll find it written as 12/8 time.

Come to think of it, in England they call that last tune "Son Of A Gambolier" and have a fine parody of it which starts off thus:

THE MAN WHO WATERS THE WORKERS' BEER

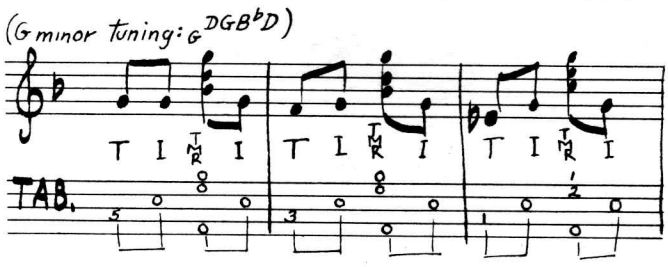
Here is another way to play 3/4 time, when you want a more sustained effect. It seems to be most effective in the C tuning. The right hand does not strum, but rather plucks each string separately, à la Spanish guitar technique.

(Accompaniment for "The Burgundian Carol," recorded by the Weavers.)

R = the ring finger of the right hand plucking up

Incidentally, the same general principle can be used for 2/4 time.

(Accompaniment for the lullabye, "All The Pretty Little Horses.")



Perhaps the next song is more familiar to you:

HUSH LITTLE BABY

The waltz, as played in America and Europe, is usually pretty much of an oom-pah-pah affair. In Latin America, Africa, and in India, however, some beautiful rhythmic variations are often introduced within the basic 3/4 time structure. Consider, for example, the possibilities of such 3/4 rhythms as these, if translated to the banjo.

Further, when you and your guitar player friends (I assume you have some!) are playing together, you might try counter rhythms. This is as much fun as singing in harmony. For example, if he is in 6/8 time, you might try your own accom-

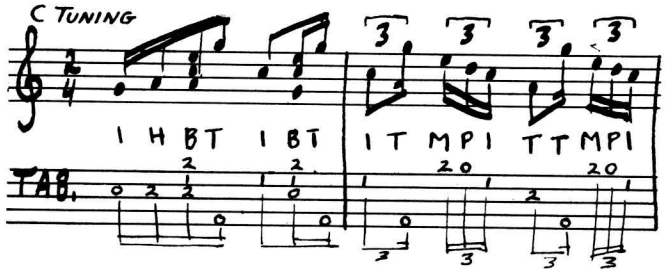
paniment in 3/4. Here's a f'rinstance:

MEXICAN HAT DANCE

SINGLE STRING WORK: Triplets

Even when playing in 2/4 or 4/4 time one sometimes wants to play a triple rhythm. Instead of dividing an eighth note into two pieces, as is usually done, it may be divided into three pieces - gives nice variety to a piece.

Here is an example: Suppose you have been chording along in the key of C. A break in the singing occurs. Let the banjo do some single string work with triplets, as shown below. Watch carefully to see which finger plucks up on which string.



Note: "Triplets" can, of course, be of several kinds besides the ones demonstrated above. For example, in a 4/4 measure, one might play three quarter notes in place of the first two, thus:

(Recognize it?)

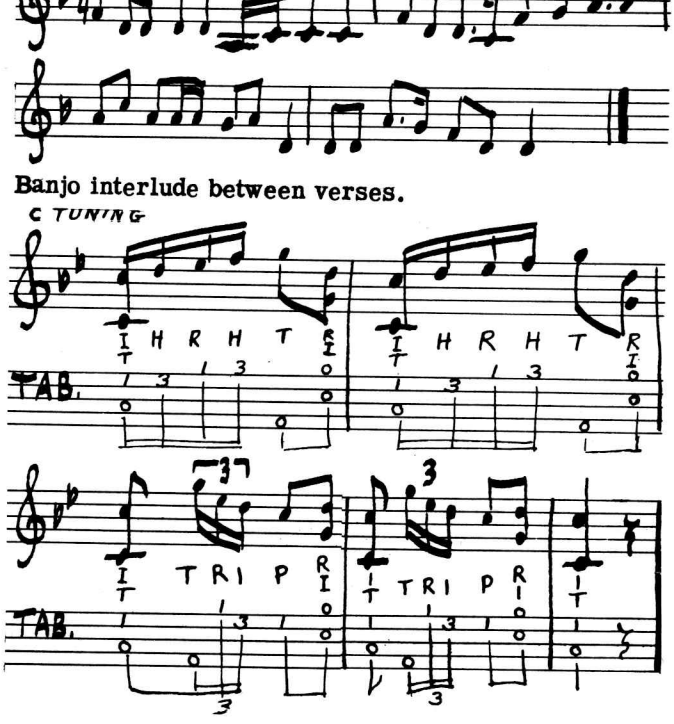
LEATHERWING BAT

Sometimes the triplets can tumble upon each other so fast that they almost give the effect of a tone cluster. Here is a favorite song of mine (Rest of the verses can be found in "Folk Song USA").

Hi, said the little leatherwing bat
I'll tell you the reason that
The reason that I fly by night
Is 'cause I've lost my heart's delight
Owdeedow, adiddle um day
Owdeedow, addiddle um day
Owdeedow, a diddle um day
And a hey lee lee.....leelileelo!

Melody for voice

Banjo interlude between verses.



XII

Blues and Jazz

All popular sheet music is printed with the chord names printed above the notes. I think you'll find it best not to bother using your fifth string much with this kind of music, but simply strum right across the other four strings: "zing, zing, zing, zing" since a steady rhythm is usually very necessary for those songs.

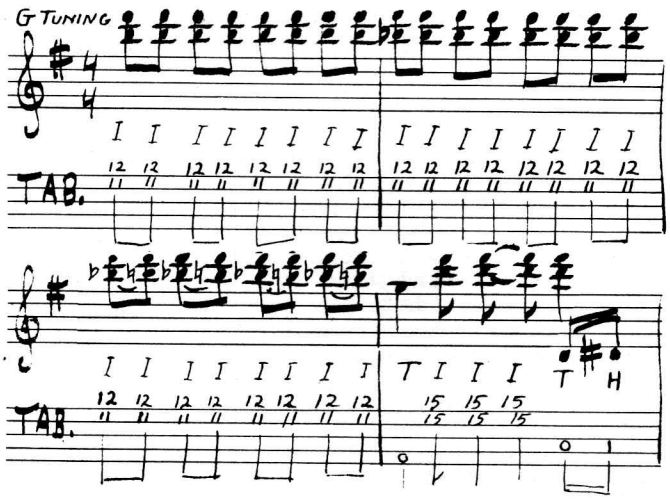
For playing the blues, however, there are a number of blues guitar techniques which can easily be transferred to your banjo.

One of them, for example, is the trick of fretting a string a 1/2 tone lower than you are supposed to, and at the same time as you pick it, push it to one side, tightening it until the pitch is slurred up to what it's supposed to be.

Another blues-guitar practice is to put intricate "runs" in between the phrases of a song (in the 'hole' of any blues melody).

To play blues, forget about other methods of strumming, and pluck with the thumb and three fingers of the right hand, as though you were playing a Spanish guitar. Try plunking away at some of the chords exactly as shown here:

One of my favorite blues runs is in the G tuning; of course I can't write it down exactly - the essence of any blues is improvisation, and one rarely plays the same blues twice precisely alike. But here is one way:



Important: Notice the slurs above, in the 3rd and the 10th measures. After fretting the string and plucking it with the right index finger, push it sidewise, tight along the fret, with the left hand. It will be stretched, and the pitch should raise a half tone This is a typical blues guitar technique.

* * *

Harmony Lesson: Blues Harmony

95% of all blues have the same basic harmony, which is why it is so much fun to play blues in a jam session...makes it easier to stay together. Blues may be fast or slow, high or low, and there may be many subtle variations within this framework, but if you will study the following, it will be easy for you to pick up any blues.

The average "three line" blues has 12 bars.

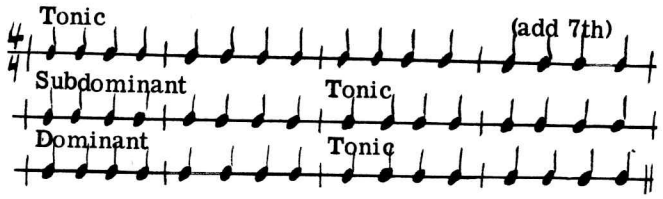
The first line of the verse is sung to the first four bars, and is all in the tonic chord, possibly ending with an added 7th note.

The repeat of the first line takes up the next four bars, the first two of which are in the sub-dominant with an added 7th and/or 9th), and the last two of which return to the tonic.

The last line of the blues takes up the last four

bars, the first two of which go into the dominant, and the last two of which return to the tonic.

In diagram form it would look like this:



If you'll examine the example of blues given on the previous page, you'll see this applies. Try it for a verse of "Easy Rider Blues".

G G7
Easy rider, see what you done done...(Lord, Lord)

C G
Easy rider, see what you done done.....

D7 G
You made me love you; now your man done come..

Another thing to notice about the blues is that the rhythm is nearly always 4/4, whether fast or slow. But especially when a blues is slow, you'll hear a quarter note frequently split up into triplets, and then if you'll listen carefully you'll see that all blues and jazz rhythm has more of a 12/8 rhythm feeling, than straight 4/4.

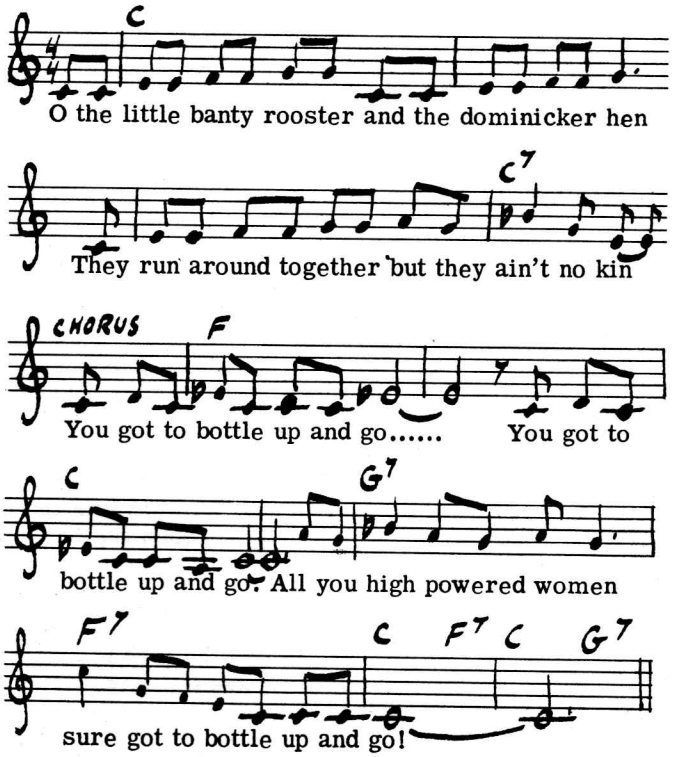
Listen to some blues guitar records and you'll understand right away what I mean. I imagine the triplet feeling comes when each downbeat gets such emphasis that the offbeats are shortened until a measure, instead of sounding like this:

is actually sounding more like this:

Remember, also, that the blues characteristically tend to flatten the 3rds and 7ths of the scale, and occasionally sharpen the 4ths. Furthermore, dissonances are more the rule that the exception. This is most common when you will sing a minor third and play a major third on the instrument.

Of course, as I said before, there are many different varieties of blues. It might be best to look further into this magnificent modern song form. Like the sonnet or the limerick, it is a form, a vehicle for a 1000 and one varieties.

1) Sometimes the first line is crowded with the words of a verse, and the 2nd and 3rd lines repeat always as a chorus, like this:



(The extra chords in the last two lines are typical variations.)

2) Sometimes the words of the verse take up the first two lines, and the 3rd line, always repeated, becomes the refrain. Such is "Frankie and Johnny", "Boll Weevil", and "Stagolee".

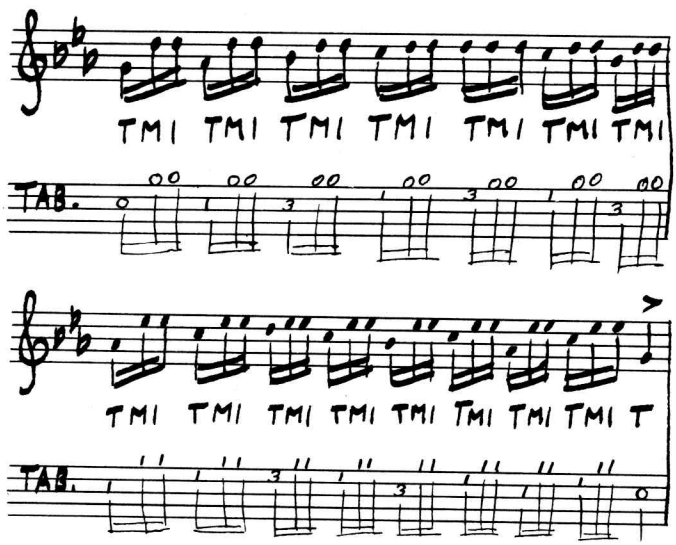
3) Sometimes you get a "4-line blues". Usually this means the middle line, which goes into the sub-dominant, is repeated. Occasionally though, it will be the first or last line which has been repeated. And there are many other variants. 'Easy Rider' is often a 4-line blues. So also is 'Git Back Blues' (see Kolb, Treasury of Folk Songs.) 'Going Down The Road Feeling Bad', though not usually thought of as a blues, appears to have at least started off as one, when you examine its harmonic pattern.

Don't think that you can just follow these directions mechanically and sing the blues. Without the subtle and characteristic inflections of both voice and instrument, without the traditional phraseology of melody, and the "answering back" of the improvised runs at the end of the lines, you haven't got it all. Your best bet is to listen a good deal of different blues musicians, such as Lonnie Johnson, Josh White, Leadbelly, Brownie McGhee, Big Bill Broonzy , Bessie Smith, and others. After the initial period of imitation of one person or another, **you** will gradually put more and more of yourself into the song, and borrow only what represents what <u>you</u> want to say. Then the blues will be your own.

XIII

Spanish and South American Music

...is not hard to play on the banjo. You may find you want to abandon the square dance strum occasionally, though, and as with the blues, finger each string separately. Here's one run which is very characteristic of Spanish Flamenco (gypsy) guitar music:



Notice in the above that while the thumb plays a kind of melody, the index and middle fingers incessantly but lightly touch the 1st string. Practice it until it becomes exceedingly fast and smooth. Arch the right wrist slightly for better control. The first string is plucked up, of course.

Listen to some Flamenco recordings (Montoya, or Gomez) to see how runs such as the above are worked into a song. In the album "Songs Of The Lincoln Battalion" I played three such Spanish melodies on the banjo.

You'll note there is a very characteristic harmony which will end a song even on a dominant chord, and using over and over such chords progressions as: Cm, B♭, A♭, G.

Rhumba rhythm also sounds good on a banjo; here are two ways to get it:

1) Brush down across all strings with the back of middle finger.
2) Brush down across all strings with thumb (if you want, just 5th string)
3) Brush up across all strings with index finger
4) Brush down across all strings with back of middle finger
5) Brush down as before again with thumb
6) Brush up across strings again with index finger
7) Brush down again with back of middle finger
8) Brush up again with index finger

...and do the above over and over again till it goes smoothly. The accents should be where the arrows point. This irregularity is the basis of the rhumba rhythm.

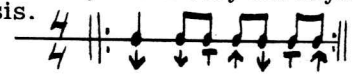
Here's another way of getting a rhumba rhythm - better but harder:

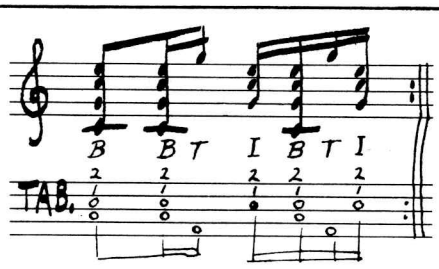
1) Pick down on the 4th and 5th strings with the back of the middle finger, and/or hammer down with the left hand on some chord at the same time.
2) A "roll"; ruffle your right hand down across
3) all strings, each finger successively straightening out.
4) With the thumb, pluck the 5th string, and at the same time hammer down again with the fingers of the left hand.
5) Brush lightly up across 1st and 2nd strings with index finger
6) Brush lightly down across strings 1,2, and 3, with the back of the ring finger and little finger.
7) Again thumb the 5th string, at the same time hammering down with the left hand.
8) Brush lightly up across strings 1 and 2 with the index finger.

The above is really quite tricky and subtle rhythm, and will take some repetition to go smoothly. If you have not already noticed, I'll point out that a rhumba rhythm is essentially a 4/4 time broken up into eight pieces, with the accents syncopated thus: 123 123 12.

In South America they have, of course, many, many other fascinating rhythms. You can learn them from a good guitar player and transfer his technique to the banjo. Wish I knew more myself, along this line!

The second of the two rhumba strums given above can be adapted quite easily for square dancing. There should be other instruments besides the banjo in the ensemble, to maintain the basic beat. With practice you can vary the rhythmic emphasis.





XIV

Summary

As you have by now gathered, I have not tried to teach you in this manual any exact method of playing any particular song, but have only briefly outlined many different methods by which you can improvise your own accompaniment to any song you want to sing. From here on, you're on your own.

While you may have found the written notes valuable to learn from, I hope you will not be too dependent on them, but will rather try to develop your ear and your imagination. At present there is practically no written music for the 5-string banjo available. When learning a song from a book, you will have to translate the melody and the chord markings to your own style of playing.

It is easy to get bored with a song if you just plunk it out, chord after chord. If you try working out such things as counter-melodies, and bass runs, however, you'll find it starts to sparkle. And the banjo is so wonderfully adapted to sparkling - a commonplace melody becomes quite subtle when surrounded with many other notes. Then it becomes like trying to pick out a constellation from all the other glittering stars in the sky.

Then when you play with other instruments, such as piano, guitar, mandolin, fiddle, harmonica, recorder, etc. you find additional enjoyment from taking the low part while they take the high part, or vice versa, and from taking the melody while they take the chords, or vice versa. Your music can become a wonderfully creative experience.

The people I learned banjo from were mostly old farmers, miners, or working people of one trade or another, who had played the instrument during their courting days, and later kept it hanging on the wall to pass away the time of an evening. Often they knew only a few tunes apiece, and maybe only one method of strumming, which they had picked up from their father, or a neighbor. Yet what they knew, they knew well, and the simple, rippling rhythm of their banjo had more art in it than many a hectic performance piece by a professional virtuoso.

What I am aiming at saying is, that it is better to know a few things well than attempt something flashy which sounds sloppy or grating. The tenor banjo was ruined, really, by exhibitionists who made an athletic exhibition out of each performance; after the piece was over the audience was amazed, of course, as at the circus, but it was not music which moved or delighted one.

I rather think that as more Americans take hold again of their traditions of folkmusic, and as we become acquainted with many different kinds of songs from various corners of the world, this 5-string banjo is liable to develop as never before. Not only will we be playing the old ballads and breakdown, but music from Europe, Israel, Russia, Asia, Africa, and South America. And the unique qualities of this instrument, with its penetrating needle-points of sound, will be heard in many new forms.

Appendix 1

IF YOU HAVE NEVER BEFORE PLAYED A BANJO . . look for the following things in buying one, or taking care of it.

1) The pegs may be of several different types, but in all cases should be firm and tight to hold the string, yet free of rust, etc., and able to turn accurately and smoothly.

   Mechanical pegs can usually be tightened or loosened by turning a screw. Oil them, if necessary.

2) In buying strings, be sure to ask for "5-string banjo strings", not those for a Tenor banjo. Get a set with an unwound third string.

   Black Diamond is the most common make. John D'Angelico, 40 Kenmare St. NYCity, sells extra long strings for banjoes with lengthened necks - and the winding on his 4th strings really last.

   When putting on strings, allow an inch or so extra to wrap around the peg. Break off what is left over by making a kink in the wire; then a strong yank will part it.

   The strings should be about 3/16" high off the fingerboard at the 12th fret. If they are much higher the strings will be stretched out of tune when you press them to the frets. You should contrive to either lower your bridge, or to bend the banjo neck back by inserting a small strip of wood at the point marked "A".

   If the strings are too low, they will buzz, and you'd best heighten your bridge.

   In damp weather, rub oil on the strings to keep them from rusting. Old strings have poor tone and pitch, and may need to be replaced.

   Incidentally, a 1st String can be substituted for a 5th String if you wish; they are of the same diameter wire.

3) In order to play in different keys, you will need a banjo capo. They are constructed differently from a guitar capo; a small coil spring holds a padded bar against the strings. See Lesson V.

4) The frets must all be firmly inlaid in the fingerboard, rounded slightly on top, so the finger can slide up and down the string without catching. While some old-fashioned banjoes had no frets at all, you will need them; they should be no more than 1/32" high. And if any of them is a little too high or too low, you will find it necessary to adjust or replace it, for the strings will buzz, or else you'll find yourself skipping a note when playing. A simple test is to play a chromatic scale on each string, to see if all frets are correct.

5) One of the common defects of a 2nd hand banjo is a warped fingerboard. Lay a yardstick or other straight edge along it. More than 1/10 of an inch sag, and the instrument will be too out of pitch to bother using.

6) It is utmost importance that the drum be tight enough to give a good tone. Of course, if the skin is old it may break if tightened too much, so be careful. However, a good new drum head will stand being tightened until the pressure of the strings will not depress the bridge more than 1/16 of an inch.

   In damp weather you'll need to tighten the head; be sure to loosen it again, though, before dry weather cracks it.

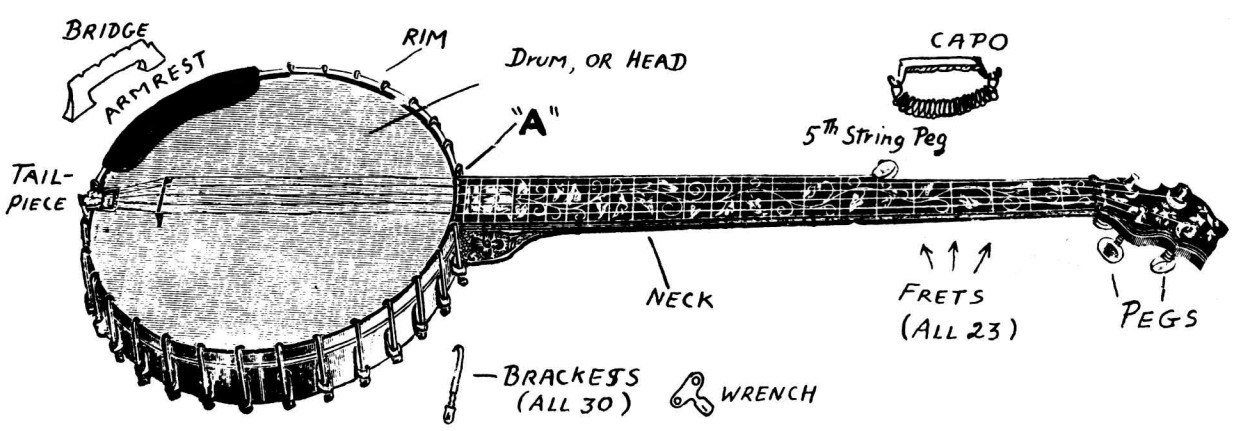
   A key, or wrench, is needed to turn the bracket nuts, thus tightening the drum.

7) The bridge should be placed so that when you fret any string at the 12th fret, you get a tone exactly one octave higher than the string's open (unfretted) tone. With old strings you may need to slant the bridge slightly to make it accurate for the 2nd, 3rd and 4th strings.

   A drop of waterproof cement on the edge of the bridge helps to keep it from sliding. A deepened notch for the 5th string may help if your thumb is catching the 5th string too hard

8) An arm rest, besides being more comfortable, prevents summertime perspiration from rotting the edge of the drum head.

   One item not pictured here is a cloth to stuff inside the drum when you want to play without being too loud. A handkerchief is too small, a bath towel too big, a diaper just right.



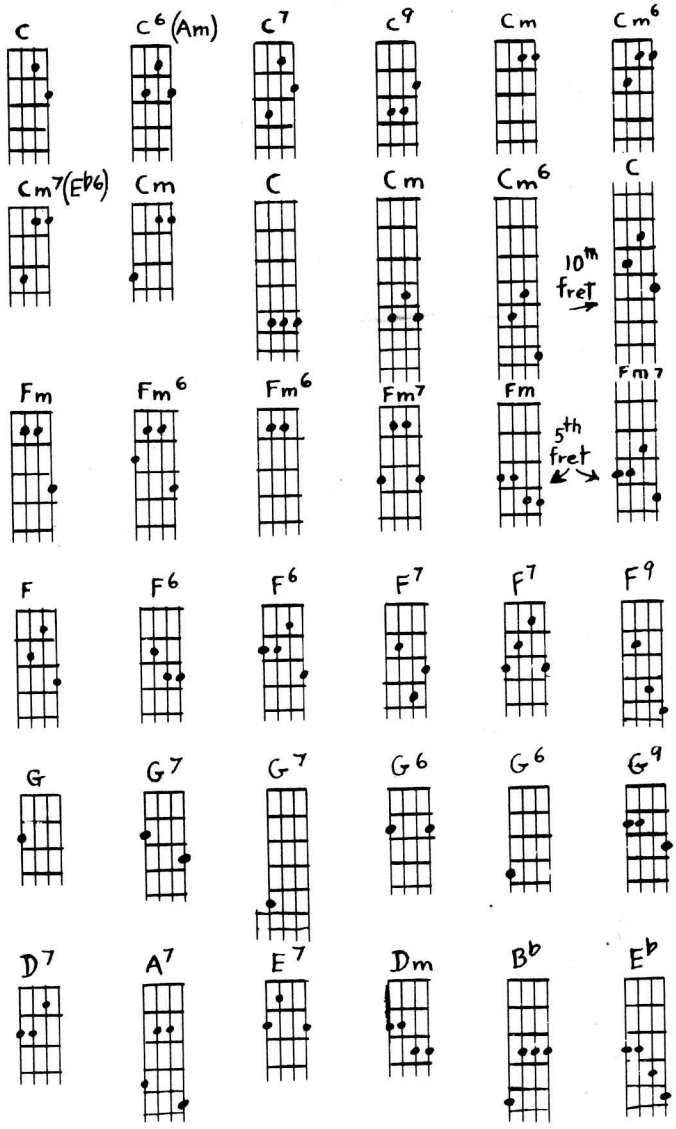
Appendix 2

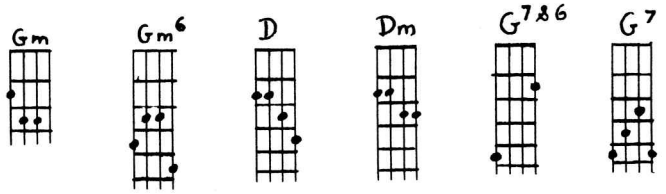
CHORD CHART - **For Reference Only**
(do not memorize all at once)

On this page are listed most of the chords you will conceivably use. When playing songs in keys other than C, simply adjust your capo (see Lesson 5) and use the same figures higher up the neck. If you do happen to need to use an E flat, B flat, or other chord in the middle of a song otherwise keyed in C, use these same figures either higher or lower on the neck of the banjo; whichever is most convenient.

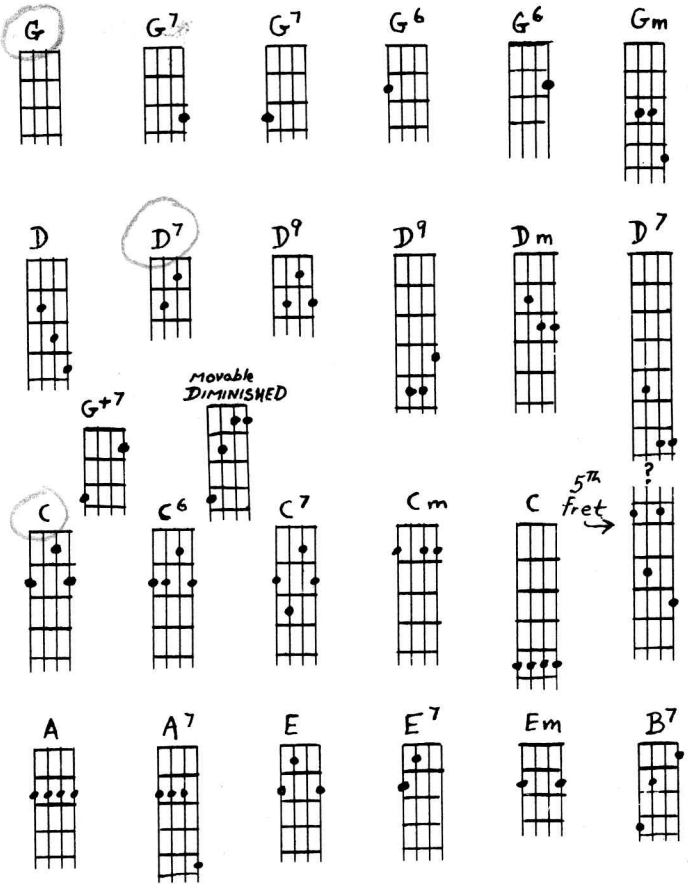
Normally the fifth string is not fretted, and does not appear in the diagrams below. With a C or G chord it sound okay; in the F, D, A, or other positions you may have to strum so as to avoid playing if it sounds out of place.

(The following chord figures are for when your banjo is in the standard "C" tuning: 4th string: low C; 3rd, G; 2nd-B; 1st-D; and 5th string, high G (one octave above 3rd)

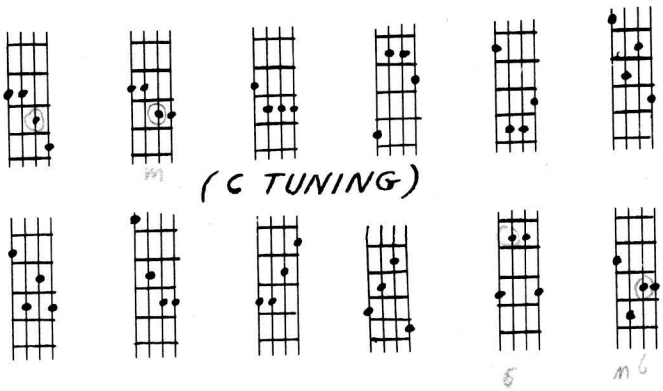




The chords given on the previous column are all standard "C" tuning (GCGBD). Old-time banjo pickers, however, used many other tunings to enable them to play certain keys, or certain tunes more easily. The most common of these is the "G" tuning, in which the 4th string is raised from C to D (other strings stay the same). I would advise you to use this tuning whenever you play in G (or, with a capo, in A , A, B , B, etc.)



If, for a special occasion, you need to find an unusual chord, it will be handy to know a handful of diagrams which you simply move up and down the neck till you find what you're looking for, or rather, what you are listening for. For most of them you'll have to ignore the 5th string.



Appendix 3

HOW TO LENGTHEN THE NECK

If your 5-string banjo is of the usual kind, the 5th string peg will stick out between the 4th and 5th frets (Look again at the diagram, page 34). This has certain disadvantages. For one thing, if you want to play in the key of G♭(F♯) you cannot move your capo high enough for it.

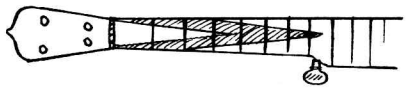
Furthermore, if you want to use a C tuning to accompany some song, but the key of C is too high for your voice (you may prefer B♭) you are also stuck. The only way you can get B♭ is in the G tuning, three frets up.

Therefore, I have found it very convenient to do a little carpentry on my banjo neck, lengthening it by two frets. Thus I can play in F or B♭ without having to capo so far up the neck that I lose my bass notes.

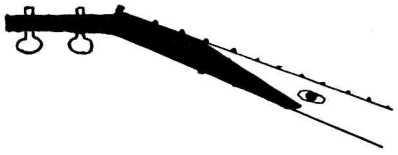
Shown here are several methods of sawing the neck off, and with good glue, dowels, etc., making the lengthened end hold firm. (This is cheaper and easier than trying to carve a complete new neck).

1) Simply saw it off on a sharp angle, and insert a piece.

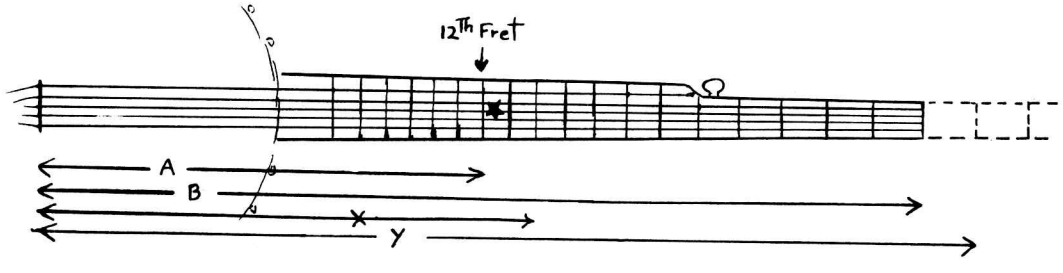
2) Another way to saw it off.



3) Or you can carve a whole new end.



Don't attempt this yourself, of course, unless you are sure of your ability; a professional repairman would charge $15-$30 for such a job. In addition to gluing an iron-firm joint, you must place the new frets in exactly the right position. (The distance from the bridge to a new fret should be twice the distance from the bridge to its 'octave fret'. See diagram. This assumes the bridge to be in a mathematically correct position. You can place it there by measuring the distance from the old nut to the 12th fret. Exactly double the distance, and you have the correct location for the bridge). Negrosene jet oil stain will make any wood look like fingerboard ebony.



NO MATTER WHAT BANJO YOU HAVE there is one small adjustment you'll want to make: a small screw placed in the fingerboard above the 5th string. Here's the reason for it.

In order to play the keys of E and E♭ (C tuning) and B♭ , B (G tuning) you'll have to tighten your 5th string, raising it's pitch the same amount that you raise that of the other strings with the capo. . . this is almost impossible to do without breaking the 5th string. I therefore put a small round-headed screw in the fingerboard, 5 frets above the 5th string peg, and directly under the 5th string itself. Don't screw it down tight, but leave about 1/32" clearance under the head; then you can slip the fifth string under it, thus artificially fretting it. In this new position you can hit the higher pitch you need. If, for any reason, you want to experiment with other screws still higher on the fingerboard, of course that is possible too.

Appendix 4

HOW TO READ MUSIC - SLIGHTLY

If you don't already know how to read music, you might take a gander at this page. It's really very simple - like touch typing, a matter of learning a few simple things well. Though you may never be so proficient as to be able to pick up a concerto and read it at sight, if you learn enough to pick out a tune in a songbook, you'll find it of much help.

First, most melodies are written in the "treble clef". This means that you'll see a spiral thingummy at the left end of the staves; it circles a line which represents a G note, as you see below. Here are two scales in the key of "C" (they start and end on C).

A "sharp" sign preceding any note (♯) raises its pitch a half tone. A "flat" sign (♭) lowers it half a tone. Thus when a song is in some other key than C, and you "have to start playing on the black notes", these black notes will be pointed out by putting the appropriate sharps or flats at the beginning of a song. Below are some of the most common of these "key signatures".

If at any time you want to go back, say, from F♯ to ordinary F ("F natural"), you put a "natural" sign (♮) in front of the note.

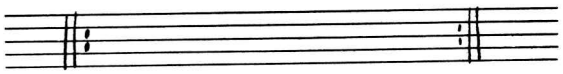
Now go through any songbook and pick out melodies you already know, and try following the notes up and down.

Second, the rhythm of a song is marked by "measures", signified by vertical bars across the staff, as shown below. Within a measure there may be several beats; the most common rhythms are known as 2/4 (two quarter notes per measure), 3/4, 4/4, and 6/8 (six eighth notes per measure).

A whole note (𝅝) is the longest note - for anything longer than that you tie two notes together, thus: 𝅝 𝅝. A dot right after a note increases its length by 1/2. Thus, all measures below have four beats in them (including "rests" - the noise stops but the rhythm keeps going!)

The following sign over a note > means you should accent, or emphasize it.

The music written between two double bars with dots, as below, is meant to be repeated.



The above rudiments are only a start; any music store has manuals which will teach you the meaning of dozens of other hieroglyphics and Italian terms which it will help you to know. The best way for you to learn, though, is to go through songbook after songbook, checking your knowledge first with songs you know, and then trying to decipher unfamiliar melodies.

A family ensemble. At far left is a dulcimer (Margot Mayo playing). Other instruments which might be used in such a group would be mandolin, French Harp (harmonica), washtub bass, penny-whistle, jaw's harp, bones, or even knitting needles tapped on the fiddle strings (while the fiddler is fiddling).

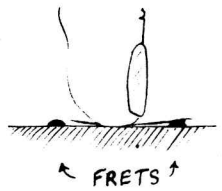
The snake in the picture is silent

Appendix 5

FINGERNAILS

In case you haven't noticed already, its of utmost importance that the fingernails of each hand be the right length.

Those of the left hand will have to be short, so the finger can come down directly and firmly on the string, without the nail touching at all.

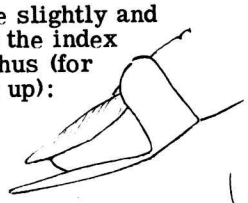


Those on the right hand should be neither too long or too short. When plucking, the flesh of the fingertip should touch the string first, but the nail be last to leave it. And when picking down, only the nail should touch the string.

Unless you have unusually tough fingernails, you'll have to wear fingerpicks on your right whenever you play long or loud. Cumbersome as they are at first, and too loud for home use, they will nevertheless protect your nails from wearing thin at the edge, or tearing.

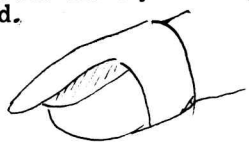
Hardly any two people use the same kind of picks. The kind I like are metal, and look like this (left):

Bend one slightly and put it on the index finger, thus (for plucking up):

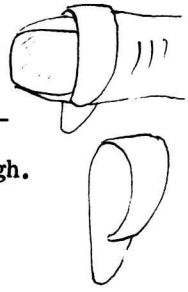


Straighten out another pick slightly, and put it on the middle finger, thus: (This is most useful when picking down on a string, as in frailing a banjo - see Lesson 6).

The ring finger should also have a pick curved over the nail, to protect it when brushing down. Here you can use the celluloid kind.

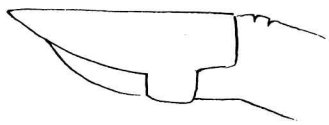


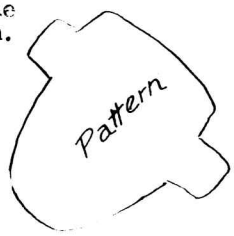
Some players such as Herman the Hermit (Capitol Records) use a thumbpick to aid in double thumbing. (See Lesson V). They're awfully loud, though.



Also, you needn't worry about a pick for the little finger - not used enough.

If you have tools and the ability, you can make your own fingerpicks out of sheet duraluminum. This type has the advantage of being able to pluck a string either up or down. The boughten kind tend to catch when used in the wrong direction.





* Footnote To History

(Continuing the subject from page 5).

The historically minded might like to pursue this matter further. Consider these points:

1) Thomas Jefferson, in his 'Notes on Virginia' (176-) mentions the "banjar" as being the chief instrument of American Negroes.

2) The instrument is mainly known in Africa in the northern half, the area of Moslem influence. (The slave trade was most intensive along the west coast of Africa).

3) The American folk style of playing seems to me to be basically African. A subtle rhythmic-melodic pattern is set up which repeats itself with no change in tempo, no matter what complex variations may be introduced. The sung melody may be quite free, at the same time. One can see a parallel in the playing of boogie-woogie piano.

4) Throughout all of the Near East and Far East instruments like the banjo are common. While they might have independently developed on two continents, one is tempted to believe that there was some direct connection. Two instruments in India have short strings played by the thumb, just like the banjo. One is the sitar (cousin of the guitar) and the other is known as the sarod - and has a drumskin head! Archeologists tell us that the ancient Egyptians had orchestras of 600 instruments, and some of them were plucked, and had skin-topped sounding boxes. Who learned what and with which and from whom? We will probably never know the exact prehistory of the instrument.

5) Paul Cadwell, New York Lawyer, and friend to all banjoists, quotes a Judge Farrar of Virginia, who learned banjo from Sweeney in the 1840's, "I am confident that Sweeney added the bass string." In other words, it would now appear possible that the use of a higher pitched thumb string was pre-Sweeney after all.

(Cont'd. on page 40)

Appendix 6

WHERE TO BUY A BANJO

If money is short, but you have the time to hunt, your best bet is to haunt the second hand stores and pawnshops. Or place a classified ad in your local paper and hope for some attic to cough up.

As for a new instrument, the Kay and the Gretch company both sell models for around $30.+. The latter can be ordered through Monky Ward.

The Paramount and Vega banjoes are available these days only in the more expensive models, $110. up. (The Vega Company, 155 Columbus Ave., Boston Massachusetts, sells the 'Whyte Laydie', a really fine model, for about $150.)

In England banjoes, accessories, and publications are readily available through the Clifford Essex Music Co. Ltd., 8 New Compton Street, London, W.C.2, England.

RECORDINGS OF BANJO PLAYING

If you can beg, borrow, or steal some of the following phonograph records, you'll best learn the style and sweep of the banjo. If the records are 78 RPM you can play them at 33 RPM and analyze what notes are being played. If they are already LP you could perhaps rerecord them on tape at a fast speed and play them back at a slower speed.

Some of the very best records of banjo playing are unfortunately now out of print, so to speak. They were recorded by the major record companies for their 'Country Music' catalogues in the '20's and '30's, and never re-issued. However, at the time of writing (1954) the following can be ordered by mail.

The Library of Congress (Music Div.) Washington, D.C., issues on LP and 78 RPM some of the very best recordings of folkmusic. Write for their catalogue and select the ones with banjo playing.

The Ethnic Folkways Recording Company, 117 West 46 St., New York, NY, has re-issued a few of the records by Uncle Dave Macon, Doc Boggs, and others recorded years ago. They also have an album by Bascom Lunsford, and several by the author. The '5-String Banjo Instructor' which explains most of this manual, can also be ordered from this company. Write for their catalogue. Everything is on LP.

The F-L Record Company, c/o West, 505 West 162nd Street, New York, NY, has re-issued a few fine old time banjo records, and can also order for you banjo records being put by small companies in the South, such as Blue Ridge and Acme.

Stinson Records, 27 Union Square West, New York, NY, issue several LP's of folksongs with banjo playing, as does also Elektra, 189 West 10 St., NY, NY.

Decca Records, 50 West 57 St., NY. NY., may still have on stock the fine albums 'Listen To Our Story' and 'Mountain Frolic'. The Commodore albums by the Almanac Singers can also be ordered from them.

Capital Records and Folkcraft Records also have some banjo playing on their square dance records.

See the catalogues of Columbia, Mercury, and King Records, for such contemporary artists as Earl Scruggs and Don Reno

BOOKS OF AMERICAN FOLK SONGS

Literally hundreds of folk song collections are now available through bookshops and libraries. Here are just a few of them, with apologies to the many whose titles have had to be omitted.

1) A Treasury of Folksong, Kolb, Bantam Books, 35¢ The cheapest, but one of the very best.
2) Various song 'kits' put out by the Cooperative Recreation Service, Delaware, Ohio, 25¢ each.
3) Lift Every Voice, People's Artists, 124 West 21 St. NY. NY. $1.25
4) The Weaver's Sing and The Caroler's Songbag. P. Seeger, Folkways Music, 151 West 46 St., NY. NY 75¢
5) Songs to Grow On, Beatrice Landeck, Marks and Sloane, N.Y.
6) American Folk Songs For Children, Animal Folk Songs, and American Folk Songs For Christmas, all edited by Ruth Seeger, Doubleday, NY.
7) The American Songbag, Carl Sandburg, Harcourt Brace, NY.
8) American Ballads and Folk Song, Our Singing Country, and Folk Song USA, all by J. and A. Lomax.
9) Crown Publishers has the series of 'Treasuries' edited by Ben Botkin. Good also are the Treasury of Mexican Folklore and the Treasury of Jewish Folklore.

BOOKS ON THE FIVE STRING BANJO

While a few leading music stores may carry five string banjo manuals, they are all ones that were written thirty or sixty years ago. Ones from Clifford Essex in England (see above) are an exception.

If you'd like to do some research in a large library, you'll uncover dozens of banjo books written fifty or a hundred years ago. Here are some, with their Library of Congress numbers.

The Universal Banjo Method - Clarence L. Partee Mt-561 .P975
Practical Hints On Modern Banjo Playing - Clarence L. Partee Mt-560 .P27
Christy's Minstrel's Complete Banjo Tutor - Mt 568 .R45
The Minstrel Banjoist - S. S. Stewart - Mt 562 .S87 M5
Lagatree's Banjo Tutor - Mt 568 .L26
C Notation Excelsior Method for the Banjo - G. L. Lansing Mt-562 .L297
Phil Rice's Method For The Banjo - Mt 568 .R45
Pan-American School For The Banjo - W.B. Leonard Mt.568 .L 39
Sherwood's Imperial Diagram Method For The Banjo - Mt 562 .S 656
Tone And Technic - Edwin Pritchard MT 565.P75
Crown Figure Method For The Banjo - C. Himmelman & Co. Mt 568 .C 78
Elias Howe's New Banjo Without A Master - Mt 568 .H71
The Perpetual Banjo School, No. 3,8,9, & 10- D. Mansfield Mt-561 .M392, .M454, .M606, .M607
Shay's Banjo School - William Shay Mt-562.S660
Banjo Method, Lessons 1,2,3,4 - Royal Music Co. Mt-562 .R88
The Eclipse Self-Instructor For Banjo - Paul De Ville Mt-568 .494
Dobson's New System For The Banjo - George C. Dobson Mt 568 .D 673
New School For the Banjo - George C. Dobson Mt 561 .D63

Sketches of Noted Banjo Players
S. Stewart ML 395 .S 85
Eno's Elementary And Advanced Technique -
Paul Eno Mt 565 .E 59
Banjo With Full Instructions - John Picht
Mt 568 .593
Banjo Lessons - composed and edited by
F. J. Bacon Mt 568 .S 578
Converse's Analytical Banjo Method -
Mt 562 .C64

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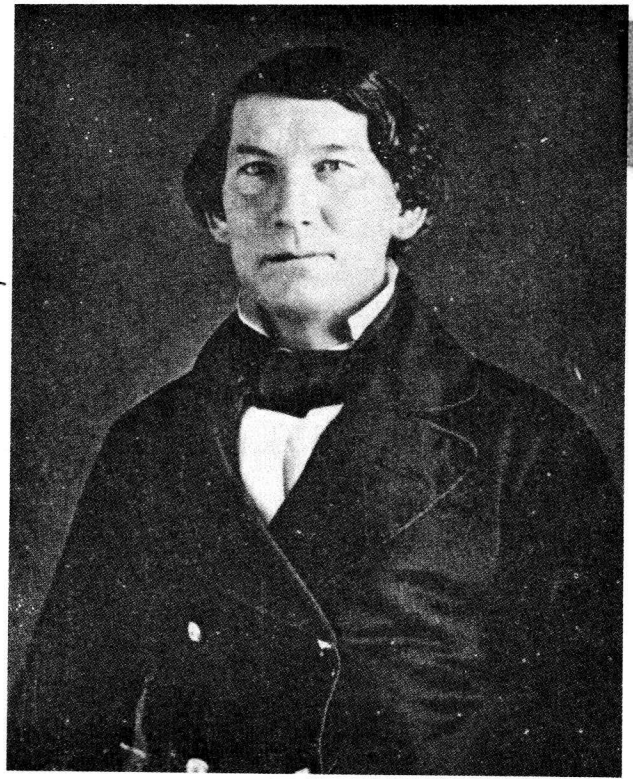
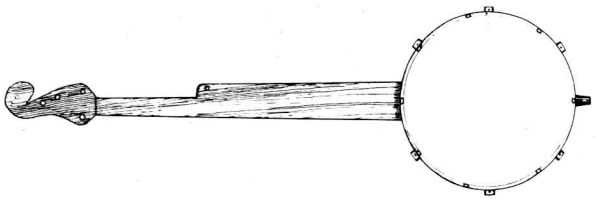




—Drawn by Cal N. Peters

Above: 'The Banjo Player' by Wm. S. Mount, 1856. Lower right: a print entitled 'Modern Music' from Goday's Magazine, 1861.

Upper right: Joel Walker Sweeney, 1813-184(7). The daguerreotype is from an interesting article in the Spring 1949 Quarterly of the Los Angeles County Museum. Right center: a banjo made by Sweeney for his niece (who was left handed). It had six brackets and no frets. The 5th string protuded vertically through the neck.

Below: a four stringed gourd banjo, about 1800. The sketch is from a watercolor of a plantation party, now in Williamsburg, Virginia.

A three stringed banjo, played by present day minstrels in a village 100 miles east of Dakar, West Africa. The strings, of unequal length, are held by friction of a simple loop around the neck, and are tightened by forcing the loop nearer the end.

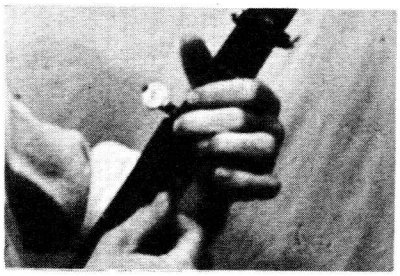
POSTSCRIPT-1960

In addition to this manual, and in addition to the 10" LP record(Folkways) which accompanies it, there is also now available a 16mm sound motion picture, showing in detail, slow motion, and closeup, all the rhythmic patterns and strumming techniques mentioned herein. The movie is 40 minutes long, black and white, and is available for sale or rental from Folkways Records, 117 West 46 St., New York City. Unfortunately, in spite of all attempts to cut costs, it is expensive: Sale, $200., Rental $18.50 (two days). However, short sections of the film can be bought separately for five or ten dollars apiece. See below;

Excerpt from the introduction to the brochure accompanying the movie: "The 5-String Banjo, an American Folk Instrumental Technique."

This 40-minute film is not intended for showing to general audiences. It amounts to a series of supplementary illustrations for an instruction manual entitled "How To Play The 5-String Banjo" written and published in 1948 by Peter Seeger. Prospective students may, if they wish, view the movie in its entirety once, but then the parts they wish to study closely should be taken separately, and looked at over and over again.

This is a new technique of learning music. Perhaps it is worthwhile to examine it in detail. Suppose the student wishes to master a particular pattern of rhythmic strumming, say 6/8 time (Chapter 15). There are forty one feet of film in which this pattern is demonstrated slowly, then fast. These forty one feet should be separated from the rest of the film and wound upon what is known as a Continuous Loop Reel*. The first part of the movie shows this being done. The student then sits down beside the projector, tunes up his banjo in the same key as the one in the movie, and plays along with the movie. The minute or so of film is played over and over again; there is no need to rewind. Within a short period of time, astonishingly difficult patterns can be mastered by students, without having to read a note of music.



Contents of the movie;

1. TUNING
2. A BASIC STRUM
   The fifth string
2a. A FIRST SONG
   Skip To My Lou
3. HAMMERING ON
   Song: John Henry
4. PULLING OFF
   Song: Hard Ain't It Hard
5. DOUBLE THUMBING
   Song: Skip To My Lou
6. THE G TUNING
   More Double Thumbing
   Song: Hard Ain't It Hard
7. FRAILING
   Song: Cripple Creek
   Slides and slurs
8. THREE FINGER PICKING, or "SCRUGGS STYLE"
   Song: Cindy
9. WHAMMING ('A style of strumming when you're in a crowd and have to make a lot of noise')
10. A SINGLE MELODY WITH NO ACCOMPANIMENT
11. PLAYING A TREMOLO
12. THE ROLL, OR RASGADO
13. WALTZ RHYTHM (3/4 time)
14. 3/4 TIME: Another method
    Also: Use of Capo
15. 6/8 TIME (Same as Irish jig)
16. BLUES AND JAZZ
17. A FLAMENCO RUN
18. RHUMBA RHYTHM - Two methods
19. The same strum adapted for a Square Dance rhythm
20. Short scenes of various banjo pickers, city and country. Ends with valuable shots of Pete Steel on 'Coal Creek March' & 'Pay Day At Coal Creek'

".....can I read notes? Hell, there are no notes to a banjo. You just play it."

(Reply made by an old-time banjo picker, interviewed around 1850, and asked if he could read music.